



Tamed by the Alien Himbo

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I was just trying to get over my ex.

Now I'm being worshipped by a 7-foot alien himbo with abs for days and zero chill.

This all started with one little mistake. Okay, fine—I accidentally volunteered for an intergalactic dating experiment. (In my defense, I thought it was a scam. Or a wine subscription box.)

Now I'm stuck on a spaceship with Jack—yes, that's really his name—a gorgeous, musclebound, zero-personal-space alien who's way too hot, way too sweet, and way too obsessed with making me his forever mate.

He brings me snacks. He purrs when I touch him. He explodes a wall when another alien flirts with me.

Casual.

I keep telling myself I'm not into it. I don't do clingy. I don't do off-worlders. I don't do guys who think courtship involves growling at vending machines.

But the more time I spend with him, the harder it is to resist...

Those dimples.

That tail.

The way he says "mine" like it's both a promise and a threat.

Turns out the real problem isn't surviving the space mission.

It's surviving him.

Read on for: A hilarious sci-fi rom-com featuring one cluelessly devoted alien himbo, one human woman way out of her depth, and a mating bond that's somehow both adorable and unhinged. Ridiculous obsession, zero chill, HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 27

CHAPTER 1

VANESSA

Pink and red hearts assault my vision the moment I push through The Love Roast's front door. Paper cupids dangle from fishing line, spinning lazily in the heating vent's breeze. My stomach churns at the sight of the "Love is Brewing" banner stretched across the back wall.

"I can't believe Julia put these up the second New Year's was over," I mutter, ducking under a particularly low-hanging cherub to reach the counter where Becca's already started the morning prep.

"At least he didn't make us wear the wings this year," Becca says, measuring beans into the grinder. "Remember last Valentine's when you got yours caught in the espresso machine?"

"Don't remind me." I tie my apron, the red fabric a perfect match for the nauseating decor. "Though I'd take cheap polyester wings over another dating disaster like Jason."

"Oh no, what happened? I thought things were going well?"

"He told me I was 'too intense' when I suggested maybe Instagram influencing wasn't a viable career path." I grab a rag and attack a coffee stain with gusto. "Then he tried to sell me on his cryptocurrency scheme."

Becca winces. "That's what, the third guy in two months?"

"Fourth if you count Coffee Cart Kyle." The stain refuses to budge. "Which I don't, since he ghosted me after I mentioned I actually read books instead of just displaying them on shelves for aesthetic photos."

"There's someone out there for you," Becca insists, her eternal optimism somehow surviving years of witnessing my romantic failures. "You just haven't found him yet."

"At this point, I'm thinking of adopting six cats and calling it a life." The door opens as our first customer arrives. "Maybe I'll start an Instagram account about that instead. 'Single Cat Lady Living Her Best Life.'"

The romance music playing overhead fades as my mind drifts back to two weeks ago, the night before Christmas. The fancy restaurant Jason picked out, the way he'd insisted on ordering wine I couldn't pronounce.

"I just think," he'd said, swirling his glass like he knew what he was doing, "we want different things. You're so... focused on stability."

"You mean I suggested getting a real job instead of betting your savings on NFTs?"

His jaw had tightened. "See? That's exactly what I mean. You're not supportive of my vision."

"Your vision is a pyramid scheme with monkey pictures."

"This is why it's not working." He'd set down his glass, barely touched. "You're too... negative. Too practical. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Probably with my rent money, which actually needs to exist."

He'd sighed, that patronizing sound I'd grown to hate. "I think we should see other people. Someone more aligned with my entrepreneurial spirit."

I'd left him with the bill and spent Christmas Day in my apartment, watching horror movies and eating microwave mac and cheese. New Year's Eve wasn't much better – just me and a bottle of cheap champagne, watching the ball drop alone while my upstairs neighbors had what sounded like the party of the century.

"Earth to Vanessa?" Becca waves her hand in front of my face. "You went somewhere dark just now."

"Just remembering my festive holiday dumping." I straighten the stack of cups with more force than necessary. "Nothing says Merry Christmas like being told you're too practical by a guy who thinks emojis are a sound investment strategy."

"His loss," Becca says, but her sympathetic look makes my chest tight. "Though maybe the universe did you a favor. Imagine being stuck with someone who thinks digital apes are the future of finance."

The door opens again, and Julia breezes in wearing a pink sweater covered in hearts that makes my retinas ache. Her wedding ring catches the light as she claps her hands together.

"Good morning, my favorite love warriors!"

I exchange a look with Becca, who's suddenly very interested in reorganizing the tea sachets.

"I just finished our Valentine's projections," Julia continues, pulling out a tablet. "Last year we doubled our regular daily sales. This year, I'm thinking we can do even better. I've ordered extra cups with the special heart designs, and we're bringing back

the Love Potion Latte."

My shoulders tense. "The one with the red food coloring that stained everything it touched?"

"That's the one! People went crazy for it." Julia swipes through her tablet. "Oh, and we'll need you both to work doubles that day. The couples just keep coming in waves."

"Great," I mutter. "Eight extra hours of watching people make googly eyes at each other."

"That's the spirit!" Julia either misses or ignores my sarcasm. "And don't forget to push the Valentine's special - buy one Love Potion Latte, get a heart-shaped cookie half off. Mark's already baking test batches in the kitchen."

"Your husband's really outdoing himself this year," Becca says.

Julia beams. "Oh, you should see what he's planning for our anniversary. Twenty-three years and he still makes every Valentine's Day magical." She sighs dreamily. "Speaking of which, I need to approve the new heart-shaped cup sleeves. Keep up the good work, girls!"

She disappears into her office, leaving behind a trail of floral perfume and romantic optimism that makes my teeth hurt.

"I might need something stronger than coffee to get through this month," I say, slumping against the counter.

"Vodka in the Love Potion Latte?" Becca suggests.

"Don't tempt me."

The morning rush ebbs, leaving behind sticky counters and the lingering scent of burnt milk. I wipe down the espresso machine, my movements sharp and precise.

"You know what? I'm done." I toss the rag into the sanitizer bucket. "No more dates, no more apps, no more well-meaning setups from married friends who think they know what's best for me."

Becca pauses mid-restock. "Come on, V. You don't mean that."

"I absolutely do." My hands move to my hips. "I'm going to focus on me. Maybe finally finish that art course I started last semester. Or learn to make sourdough bread. Something productive that doesn't end with me crying into a pint of ice cream at midnight."

"But-"

"No buts. From now on, it's just me, myself, and my career goals."

"What about love?"

"What about it? The only thing these dating disasters have taught me is that love is seriously overrated." I gesture at the Valentine's decorations. "All this? It's just marketing. And I'm not buying it anymore."

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CHAPTER 2

JACK

I push open the door to The Love Roast, and I'm immediately assaulted by an explosion of pink and red. Paper hearts dangle from fishing line attached to the ceiling, swaying with the draft from the door. The smell of coffee mingles with something artificially sweet - vanilla and strawberry, perhaps.

"Welcome to The Love Roast!" A barista calls out from behind the counter. Her name tag reads 'Vanessa,' and her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes.

I pull out my phone, pretending to check messages while I observe the café's patrons. Two young women share a heart-shaped cookie, giggling over their phones. An elderly couple holds hands across their table, sharing what appears to be a single drink with two straws.

"Fascinating," I mutter under my breath, making a mental note about human mating rituals and shared sustenance.

"Can I help you?" Vanessa asks, her forced cheerfulness cracking slightly.

"Yes, I'd love to understand the significance of the dual-straw beverage consumption I'm witnessing." I gesture toward the elderly couple.

She blinks. "The... what?"

"The sharing of drinks. Is this a common courtship ritual in your establishment?"

A slight frown crosses her face. "It's just a couple sharing a milkshake. Are you going to order something?"

"Of course. What would you recommend for someone conducting research on human mat- I mean, for someone interested in the full Love Roast experience?"

"Our current special is the Cupid's Arrow Mocha. It comes with heart-shaped marshmallows." She says this like she's reading from a script she's tired of performing.

"Perfect. I'll take one of those. And tell me, do you find that these themed beverages actually enhance romantic connections between your customers?"

"Sir, there's a line forming." She points behind me, where indeed, three people now wait.

"Right, yes. The mocha then. For research purposes."

I step aside, pulling out my small notebook to jot down observations while I wait. The humans here seem to either embrace or reject the romantic atmosphere with very little middle ground. Fascinating indeed.

Soon, rush dies down, leaving me alone at the counter while Vanessa wipes down the espresso machine. The paper hearts above cast dancing shadows across her face as she works.

"These decorative organs," I say, pointing upward. "They're rather anatomically incorrect, aren't they?"

She pauses mid-wipe. "What?"

"The hearts. Real human hearts are more conical, with distinct chambers and major blood vessels. These are just two rounded shapes joined at the bottom. I mean, I'm not a biologist but that's true, isn't it?"

A small laugh escapes her lips - the first genuine one I've heard from her. "They're symbolic. Nobody wants to see actual heart diagrams while they're drinking coffee."

"But wouldn't anatomical accuracy better represent the physical manifestation of love? The actual organ pumping blood through the body?"

"That's..." She sets down her cloth. "That's not really what Valentine's Day is about."

"No? Then why celebrate it at all? These decorations, the special drinks - what purpose do they serve?"

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asks, one eyebrow quirked high.

I let out a laugh. "You got me."

"European?"

"Further."

"Look, it's just..." She glances around the empty café. "It's commercialized nonsense designed to make single people feel bad and coupled people spend money."

"Fascinating. So you don't participate in the cultural rituals of Valentine's Day?"

"God, no. Not anymore, at least. I'm done with all that." She starts reorganizing cups

with unnecessary force. "Romance is overrated."

"Yet you work in an establishment that promotes it."

"Bills don't pay themselves." She eyes me suspiciously. "Why are you so interested anyway?"

"Professional curiosity. I'm an anthropologist studying modern cultural practices."

"Right. Of course you are." She shakes her head, but I notice the tension in her shoulders has eased slightly. "Any other burning questions about our anatomically incorrect décor?"

I take a sip of my mocha, letting the overly sweet concoction coat my tongue. The heart-shaped marshmallows bob in the drink like tiny boats. "So these chocolate-giving rituals - they're meant to demonstrate romantic interest?"

"Pretty much." Vanessa leans against the counter, crossing her arms. "Though nowadays it's more about obligation than actual feelings. Like, you have to get your coworkers something or you're a jerk."

"That seems counterintuitive to the purpose of romance."

"Welcome to capitalism." She snorts, then starts arranging heart-shaped cookies in the display case. "Everything meaningful gets turned into a chance to sell stuff."

"And the flowers? I noticed several delivery personnel bringing bouquets to various establishments this morning."

"Roses especially." She rolls her eyes. "Because nothing says 'I love you' like overpriced flowers that'll die in a week."

"The temporary nature of the gift doesn't negate its symbolic value, though, does it?" I pull out my notebook again. "In many cultures, ephemeral gifts carry special significance precisely because they don't last."

She pauses, a cookie halfway to the display. "I... huh. I never thought about it that way."

"The impermanence mirrors the fleeting nature of human li- of life itself." I catch myself just in time. "Makes the moment more precious."

"That's actually kind of beautiful." She shakes her head. "Still doesn't make up for getting dumped on Christmas Eve though."

"Hm. Personal experience has informed your perspective on these customs?"

"You could say that." She busies herself with the cookies again, but I notice her shoulders tense. "Let's just say I'm done being anyone's Valentine."

I gather my notes and empty cup, but my feet refuse to move toward the door. Something about her candor, her sharp wit beneath that performative cheerfulness, draws me in like a gravitational anomaly.

"Thanks for being my unwitting research subject," I say, tucking my notebook away.

"Thanks for being the weirdest customer I've had all week." She smirks, and the expression transforms her face, brings light to those guarded eyes. "Most people just order their drinks and leave."

"Most people are boring." The words slip out before I can filter them through my anthropological persona. "I mean, from a research perspective."

I pause at the door, looking back. She's already busy with another customer, but there's a subtle shift in her demeanor - her smile reaches her eyes now, and her movements seem lighter, less mechanical.

I step out into the January chill, and I realize I'm already planning my next visit. For research purposes, of course. Nothing more.

The Project Veritas handbook specifically warns against this kind of fascination. But then again, I've never been good at following rules.

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CHAPTER 3

VANESSA

I wipe down the counter for the third time, my mind drifting back to those strange questions. Who asks about Valentine's Day like they've never heard of it before? He certainly didn't have any kind of strange accent that stood out, either.

"Hello? Vanessa?" Becca waves her hand in front of my face. "You've been cleaning that same spot for five minutes."

"Sorry, I just..." My cloth pauses mid-swipe. "Remember that guy from earlier? The one asking all those weird questions?"

"Tall, built like a linebacker doing cosplay as a professor?" Becca's eyes sparkle. "Hard to forget."

"Did you notice how he talked? Like he was conducting a survey or something?" I toss the cloth into the sanitizer bucket. "Who asks 'What is the cultural significance of exchanging heart-shaped confections during this particular seasonal celebration?'"

Becca snorts. "Maybe he's an alien doing research on human mating rituals."

"Right? I kept waiting for him to pull out a Star Trek holo pad thing and start documenting human behavior in the wild." I mimic writing in the air. "'The female of the species appears agitated by pink cardboard hearts.'"

"But you have to admit, he was kind of cute in that confused-professor way."

My stomach does an annoying little flip. "No. No way. I'm not even thinking about that. Besides, who shows up at a coffee shop asking about the 'evolutionary advantages' of giving chocolate to potential mates?"

"Someone who's clearly interested in studying you." Becca wiggles her eyebrows.

"Stop it." I grab another cloth, needing something to do with my hands. "I'm not looking for anyone right now, remember? Especially not some weird anthropologist who probably thinks dating is a social experiment."

But even as I say it, I can't help remembering the intensity in those green eyes, the way his questions seemed genuinely curious rather than condescending. There was something different about him, something I can't quite put my finger on.

The next day, I'm refilling the pastry display when bell chimes and my heart does a little stutter-step. There he is again, same stubble, same broad shoulders filling out a navy sweater that looks soft enough to touch. Not that I'm thinking about touching it.

"Welcome to Love Roast," I say, trying to keep my voice professional. "Same as yesterday?"

"Actually," Jack leans against the counter, those green eyes fixed on mine with an intensity that makes my skin tingle. "I'd like to propose something different."

"We do have other drinks besides black coffee."

"I'm more interested in conducting a practical study of modern dating customs." He pulls out a small notebook. "Would you be willing to participate in a first-hand examination of contemporary courtship rituals?"

I blink. "Are you... asking me out?"

"Yes. Though I'd appreciate if you'd allow me to document the experience. For research purposes."

Behind me, Becca drops something with a clatter. I ignore her barely suppressed giggle.

"Let me get this straight. You want to take me on a date... as a research project?" The exact thing I told Becca I thought he would do.

"I find you fascinating." He says it so matter-of-factly that my cheeks heat up. "Your insights on Valentine's Day traditions yesterday were particularly illuminating. I'd like to learn more."

"I don't date anymore." The words come out automatically, but they lack conviction. "And I'm definitely not interested in being someone's sociology experiment."

"What if I promise to leave the notebook at home?" His mouth quirks up at one corner. "Though I can't guarantee I won't ask questions. It's an occupational hazard."

"I..." My resolve wavers. There's something disarming about his directness, the way he's not trying to be smooth or clever. "This is crazy."

"Is that a yes?"

Becca coughs behind me in a way that sounds suspiciously like "Say yes!"

I should say no. I've sworn off dating. But something about his earnest curiosity makes me want to see where this goes. "Fine. One date. But no note-taking, no recording devices, and if you start treating me like a lab specimen, I'm out."

"Agreed." His smile broadens. "Tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night works," I say, trying to ignore how my heart speeds up when his smile widens. "Though I should warn you, dating around here isn't exactly anthropologically fascinating."

"What do you mean by that?" He pulls out that little notebook again, and I reach across the counter to push it back into his pocket. His chest is solid under my fingertips, and I quickly withdraw my hand.

"No notes, remember?"

"Ah, right. My apologies." He tucks it away. "But please, enlighten me about typical courtship patterns in this geographic region."

I can't help but laugh at his formal phrasing. "Well, usually it's dinner and a movie. Maybe drinks after if things go well."

"Dinner and a movie?" His nose wrinkles like I've suggested we go dumpster diving. "That's the standard protocol for initial romantic encounters?"

"Protocol? Who talks like that?" I shake my head. "But yeah, that's pretty much the go-to first date around here."

"How disappointingly conventional." He straightens up, something almost challenging in his expression. "I can devise a far more engaging experience."

"Oh really?" I cross my arms. "And what exactly did you have in mind, Professor?"

"That would spoil the element of surprise." He checks his watch – an actual analog watch, who even wears those anymore? "I'll collect you at seven tomorrow evening."

"Collect me? I'm not a research specimen."

"Pick you up," he corrects himself quickly. "My apologies. Sometimes my professional vocabulary bleeds into casual conversation."

"Right." I scribble my address on a napkin, already wondering if I'm making a huge mistake. "Seven it is."

He takes the napkin with surprising care, folding it precisely before tucking it into his pocket. "Until tomorrow then, Vanessa."

The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine that I absolutely refuse to acknowledge. As he walks out, shoulders square and brimming with confidence, I can't decide if I've just made a terrible or brilliant decision.

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CHAPTER 4

JACK

The Twin Oaks Museum of Natural History looms before us, its granite facade catching the moonlight. My access card beeps against the reader, and the door clicks open.

"Are you sure we're allowed to be here?" Vanessa whispers, her breath visible in the February air.

"I have special privileges as faculty." I hold the door, watching her hesitate. "Most humans prefer restaurants for initial courtship, but I thought this might be more... illuminating."

She raises an eyebrow. "Most humans? You say that like you're not one."

My pulse quickens, but I laugh it off. "Occupational hazard. Anthropologist, remember?"

The security lights cast long shadows through the dinosaur bones in the main hall. Vanessa's footsteps echo against the marble floor as she approaches the T-Rex.

"This is definitely different," she says, but her eyes sparkle with interest. "I haven't been here since that field trip in third grade."

"What do you remember from then?"

"Mostly that Tommy Peterson threw up in the planetarium."

I guide her toward the anthropology wing, my hand hovering near the small of her back but not quite touching. "And now?"

She stops at a display of ancient tools, pressing close to the glass. "Now I'm thinking this is either the most creative first date I've been on, or you're planning to murder me, like some kind of nerdy Patrick Bateman."

"If I were planning to murder you, I wouldn't have chosen a building with security cameras."

Her laugh echoes through the empty halls. "You've really thought this through, huh?"

"I find traditional dating rituals limiting. Dinner, movies, small talk about the weather." I wave my hand dismissively. "How can you truly know someone over breadsticks?"

"So instead you bring them to a dark museum after hours?" Her smile grows wider. "I have to admit, it's working for me."

I lead Vanessa around a corner where I've set up a small table near the closed snack bar. The security lights cast a soft glow over the cheese plate, crackers, and bottle of wine I'd arranged earlier.

"You really did plan this out." She runs her finger along the edge of the table. "Should I be impressed or concerned that you've got food smuggling down to a science?"

"The guard and I have an understanding." I pour the wine into plastic museum gift shop cups. "He gets the leftover cheese."

"Bribing security? Professor Tanner, I'm shocked." She accepts the cup, her fingers brushing mine. "What other rules do you break?"

"Only the ones that don't make sense." I gesture toward the nearby evolution exhibit. "Like the idea that first dates require awkward small talk over overpriced meals."

She takes a sip of wine, studying the display case of early human tools. "So instead you prefer awkward small talk over stolen cheese?"

"The cheese was legally purchased." I pop a grape into my mouth. "And I find nothing awkward about discussing human mat- dating rituals while surrounded by our ancestors."

"There's that 'human' thing again." She moves closer to examine a Neanderthal skull. "You talk like you're writing a research paper."

My heart rate increases - a physiological response I'm still getting used to in this form. "Professional hazard. Sometimes it's hard to step out of observer mode."

"And what are you observing now?" She turns to face me, challenging.

"That you're more relaxed here than you were at the coffee shop." I step closer, noting how her pupils dilate. "That you prefer direct questions to social niceties."

"Questions like...?"

I stop myself for a moment, thinking my next words through before I say something I can't take back. It's too early to tell her how bright her eyes look, for example. Or how soft I bet her lips would feel against mine.

"Why do humans place such emphasis on shared meals during courtship?" I ask,

watching her reaction carefully. "The biological need for sustenance seems unrelated to pair bonding."

Vanessa laughs, a genuine sound that echoes off the ancient artifacts. "You make it sound so clinical. But honestly?" She takes another sip of wine. "I've never thought about it that way. Maybe we just need something to do with our hands while we figure out if we like each other."

"And have you figured that out yet?" The words slip out before I can analyze their implications.

"I'm still deciding." She moves to the next display case, but her smile gives her away. "What about you? Any other burning questions about human behavior?"

"Why do couples exchange hearts as symbols of affection? The anatomical organ bears little resemblance to the stylized version."

"God, you really don't let up, do you?" She turns to face me, her eyes bright with amusement. "Most guys just ask about my zodiac sign or what I do for fun."

"Would you prefer that?"

"No." She steps closer, and my enhanced senses pick up the slight increase in her heart rate. "It's refreshing. You actually listen to the answers."

The warmth in her voice triggers something in me - something dangerous, something beyond mere scientific curiosity. I shouldn't be feeling this pull, this desire to understand her specifically rather than humans in general.

"What about you?" she asks. "Why are you really so interested in how relationships work?"

"Perhaps I'm trying to understand why they so often fail." I move to stand beside her, close enough to catch the scent of her shampoo. "Why humans keep attempting them despite the statistical improbability of success."

"Wow." She lets out a soft breath. "That's... actually exactly what I've been wondering lately."

The security lights flicker, casting shadows across her face. My mission parameters flash through my mind - observe, document, maintain distance. But the way she's looking at me now makes those parameters feel like arbitrary restrictions rather than vital protocols.

"And have you found your answer?" she asks.

I realize I'm standing too close, caring too much, risking too much. But I can't seem to step away.

This is a dangerous road I'm walking down, but I'm simply too stubborn to veer off of it.

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CHAPTER 5

VANESSA

Sunlight streams through my window, and for once, I don't hit snooze. My lips curve into a smile before I even open my eyes. The warmth in my chest has nothing to do with my fluffy comforter.

"Oh god," I whisper to my empty bedroom, pressing my palms against my cheeks. They're warm. "I'm actually excited about a guy. This is terrible."

But the giddiness doesn't fade as I swing my legs out of bed, practically bouncing to my closet. I catch myself humming while picking out my work uniform - the same boring knee-length black dress I wear every day.

My phone buzzes. It's Becca.

"Spill everything," she demands before I can even say hello. "I've been dying all night."

"It was..." I pause, trying to find words that won't sound completely ridiculous. "Different. Good different. He kept asking these questions about why humans- I mean, why people do the things they do on dates. Like he was studying us."

"Kinky."

"Not like that!" Heat rushes to my face. "Just... thoughtful. He actually listened when

I talked about my art. Didn't try to mansplain color theory to me like Derek did."

"Low bar, but continue."

I'm grinning like an idiot while putting on mascara. "We were the only ones in the Egyptian exhibit, and he asked me what I thought happened to all the ancient couples who left love notes in the tombs. If their feelings survived somewhere, somehow. Who thinks like that?"

"Apparently your alien boyfriend does."

"He's not my-" I stop, catching my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are bright, my cheeks flushed. I look... happy. Actually happy, not the forced smile I've been wearing since Christmas. "I don't know what he is. But I want to find out."

"That's the spirit! Now please tell me you're seeing him again."

The giddiness bubbles up again. "Friday. He's planning something but won't tell me what. Says it's another 'social experiment.'"

I untie my apron, ready to collapse after a long shift, when Jack appears at the counter. His presence sends an unexpected flutter through my stomach.

"Ready for some simulated combat?" He grins, leaning against the pastry case.

"That's your big plan? Laser tag?"

"It's perfect for studying competitive human behavior in a controlled environment." He pauses. "Plus, I get to shoot at you."

"Oh, it's like that?" I grab my purse from under the counter. "Game on, Professor."

The laser tag place is packed with teenagers, but Jack doesn't seem to notice as he studies the scoring system with intense concentration. "Fascinating. A hierarchical display of dominance through light-based weaponry."

"You make everything sound like a research paper." I nudge him with my elbow. "Just admit you want to play."

At the registration desk, we have to pick our call signs. Jack types his in without hesitation.

"Anthropoid?" I peek at his screen. "Really leaning into the whole professor thing, aren't you?"

"It's scientifically accurate. What's yours?"

I type quickly: "BaristaBanshee."

"Interesting choice. Does it reflect your frustration with customer service or-"

"It reflects that I'm going to destroy you." I zip up the vest, adjusting the sensors. "What's your hypothesis about that, Dr. Tanner?"

His eyes spark with something that makes my breath catch. "Hypothesis: your competitive nature suggests unresolved tensions seeking outlet through recreational combat."

"Or maybe," I check the weight of the laser gun, "I just really want to shoot you."

"The question remains - why?"

"Keep talking like a textbook and you'll find out."

The waiting room fills with more players, but Jack keeps his focus on me, like I'm the most fascinating specimen he's ever encountered. It should be weird. Instead, it makes me feel... special.

"Next group, you're up!" calls the attendant.

Jack gestures toward the dark doorway. "Shall we test your theory about destruction?"

"After you, Anthropoid."

The neon maze pulses with black lights and synthetic fog. I duck behind a barrier, my heart racing, and scan for movement. For someone who spends his days buried in academic papers, Jack moves like... well, not like any professor I've ever seen.

"That's seven hits to two," his voice echoes from somewhere in the darkness. "Are you sure you want to stick with that destruction theory?"

I press my back against the wall, trying to steady my breathing. "How are you doing this? Did you take some secret military laser tag course?"

"Simple geometry and predictive movement patterns." He appears at the end of the corridor, his vest glowing eerily.

I fire, but he's already sliding behind a pillar. The speed of his movement makes my jaw drop.

"That was close," he calls out. "Your aim is improving."

"And you're not playing fair. Nobody moves that fast."

"Perhaps you're just slow?" There's a teasing lilt in his voice that makes me want to prove him wrong.

My vest vibrates - another hit. I whirl around to find him right behind me, grinning. "How did you-"

"You telegraph your position when you talk." He's not even breathing hard. "Basic hunting principles."

"Hunting?" I raise an eyebrow. "What exactly do you hunt, Professor?"

For a split second, something flickers across his face - surprise? worry? - but then his easy smile returns. "Knowledge, of course. Speaking of which, your defensive posture suggests-"

I take advantage of his lecture mode to fire point-blank at his chest sensor. The satisfying beep of a hit makes me smirk. "Suggests what?"

"That I should stop underestimating you." His green eyes gleam in the dark, and suddenly I'm very aware of how close we're standing.

The moment stretches, electric and uncertain, until a group of teenagers rounds the corner, breaking the spell with their shouts and laser fire.

The walk home stretches longer than usual, each step weighted with possibility. Jack matches my pace, his shoulder occasionally brushing mine. The contact sends sparks through my sweater.

"Hey..." My heart thunders hard while I try to find the right words for what I want to tell him. "That was... a really good date."

He leans forward slightly, and I catch the scent of his cologne - something woody and unfamiliar. My eyes flutter closed...

"Thank you for participating in tonight's experiment, Vanessa."

My eyes snap open. He's already turning away, hands in his pockets. "That's it?"

"For now." He glances over his shoulder, and the look in his eyes makes my knees weak. "I prefer to gather more data before drawing conclusions."

I watch him disappear around the corner, pressing my fingers to my lips where his kiss should have been.

But for once, anticipation feels better than satisfaction.

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CHAPTER 6

JACK

I sit in my office, surrounded by research notes and anthropological texts, but my mind keeps drifting to Vanessa. Her quick wit during laser tag still echoes in my thoughts.

"Getting attached to a subject is dangerous," I mutter, pulling up my observation logs on my tablet. "But her responses are... unique."

The cursor blinks as I type: 'Subject displays remarkable deviation from standard human courtship patterns. Demonstrates high intelligence and emotional awareness, yet maintains strong defensive barriers. Further study warranted.'

Delete. That's not objective enough.

"Computer, new entry." I pace the room. "Human dating rituals typically follow predictable escalation patterns. Physical contact increases gradually, leading to..." I stop, remembering how my hand brushed hers at the museum. The unexpected jolt that ran through me. "End entry."

I pull out my reference guide on human courtship behaviors. Chapter seven: Physical Escalation. The kiss that didn't happen last night wasn't just about research. I wanted to kiss her. Still do.

"This is compromising the study," I tell myself, but even as I say it, I'm already

planning our next encounter.

My PerComm chirps. A message from Command: 'Monthly report due. Focus on local mating customs.'

Perfect timing. Or terrible. I can't decide which.

"Computer, analyze success rates of human courtship when male initiates physical contact versus female initiation."

The data streams across my screen, but I'm not really seeing it. Instead, I'm remembering Vanessa's laugh when she scored a hit on me in laser tag. The way her eyes lit up when I asked about her art.

"Computer, end analysis." I rub my temples. "This isn't just research anymore, is it?"

The silence in my office provides no answers, but my racing pulse tells me everything I need to know. I'm in trouble. Deep, fascinating trouble.

I settle into a corner table at The Love Roast, pretending to grade papers while observing Vanessa's interactions. My PerComm hums against my wrist, probably another message from Command, but I ignore it.

"Here's your cappuccino, Mrs. Chen," Vanessa says to an elderly regular. "I added an extra shot of caramel, just how you like it."

Mrs. Chen beams. "Such a dear. When are you going to let my grandson take you to dinner?"

"Still focusing on my career." Vanessa's smile stays warm, but I catch the slight tension in her shoulders. She's perfected this dance of deflection.

A group of college students crowds the counter, chattering about midterms. Vanessa handles their complicated orders with efficiency, maintaining pleasant small talk without revealing anything personal. It's masterful, really. She's built walls that look like windows.

My tablet displays my latest field notes, cursor blinking accusingly. I should be documenting this. Instead, I'm counting the times she tucks loose strands of hair behind her ear – seven so far.

"Need a refill?" She appears at my table, coffee pot in hand.

"Always." Our fingers brush as she takes my cup. My skin tingles where we touched – a physiological response I definitely shouldn't be experiencing.

"More student papers?"

"Something like that." The guilt twists in my gut. Every interaction is based on a lie, yet I've never felt more honest than when I'm with her.

"You know," she says, refilling my cup, "most people don't grade with such an intense expression. You look like you're trying to decode ancient hieroglyphics."

I laugh, probably too loudly. "Maybe I am. Human behavior can be... complex."

"Says the guy who took me to laser tag." Her eyes sparkle with amusement.

The warmth in her voice hits me like a physical force. This isn't research anymore. This is something dangerous, something real, and completely outside my mission parameters.

My PerComm buzzes again. This time, stealthily, I check it: 'Report status: Overdue.'

Explain deviation from standard observation protocols.'

I look up at Vanessa, who's already moving to help another customer, and realize I have no explanation to give. Not one Command would accept, anyway.

I watch Vanessa work through the afternoon rush, waiting for the right moment. My PerComm's warnings fade to background noise as I rehearse the words in my head. When the last customer leaves with their to-go cup, I approach the counter.

"I was thinking," I say, leaning forward slightly. "Maybe we could have dinner at my place tomorrow night? I make a pretty good pasta."

The slight widening of her eyes, the way her hands pause while wiping down the counter – these micro-expressions speak volumes. My enhanced perception picks up her elevated heart rate. Not excitement. Anxiety.

"Oh." She tucks a loose hair behind her ear. "That's... I mean..."

"Too forward?" I ask, mentally kicking myself. Of course it is. Humans have specific progression patterns for intimacy, and I've just violated several of them.

"Maybe a little?" Her smile is apologetic but guarded. "It's not that I don't... I mean, I've really enjoyed our dates."

"But you're not comfortable with that yet."

"Yeah." She relaxes slightly at my understanding. "Sorry, I just..."

"Don't apologize." I straighten up, adjusting my approach. "Actually, I have a better idea. Why don't you choose our next activity? Whatever makes you comfortable."

Her eyebrows lift in surprise. "Really?"

"Really. I'm interested in what you'd pick." This isn't just research talking – I genuinely want to know.

She leans against the counter, considering. "Let me think about it?"

"Take all the time you need." I mean it, even as my PerComm vibrates again with what's surely another warning about mission parameters.

The tension in her face eases. "Thanks for understanding."

"Understanding is kind of my job description," I say, immediately regretting the reminder of my cover story.

But she just laughs. "Right, the anthropologist. Always studying human behavior."

If she only knew how accurate that was.

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CHAPTER 7

VANESSA

The scent of sizzling meat and fresh herbs dances through the air as I lead Jack through the bustling food festival. Street lamps cast a warm glow over the vendor stalls, and my stomach growls at the sight of steaming dumplings.

"So this is how humans congregate for sustenance," Jack says, studying a food truck's menu with intense concentration.

I laugh, nudging his shoulder. "You make it sound like a science experiment. Haven't you been to a food festival before?"

"I find group eating customs fascinating." He tilts his head. "What's the protocol here? Do we sample everything?"

"That's the fun part." My fingers brush against his arm. "No rules. We just try whatever looks good."

A nearby vendor calls out, "Fresh tamales! Best in Twin Oaks!"

"Those smell incredible," I say, already moving toward the stall. "Want to start there?"

Jack follows, his movements precise as always. "I trust your judgment on local cuisine customs."

We order two tamales, and I watch his face as he takes his first bite. His eyes widen slightly.

"This combination of flavors is... unexpected. Pleasant."

"Just wait until you try the Korean fusion tacos." I point to another stall. "They do this amazing bulgogi-"

"You seem different tonight," he interrupts, studying my face with that intense focus I'm starting to find endearing rather than unnerving.

"Different how?"

"More relaxed. Your shoulders aren't as tense. Your smile reaches your eyes more frequently."

I pause, realizing he's right. The knot of anxiety that usually sits in my chest during dates has loosened. "Maybe I'm just hungry."

"No," he says. "I've observed you eating before. This is different."

"You know, most guys don't analyze my body language quite so thoroughly."

"Most guys are idiots." He says it with such matter-of-fact conviction that I burst out laughing.

"Can't argue with that." I grab his hand, surprising myself with the boldness. "Come on, those tacos aren't going to eat themselves."

The Korean fusion tacos are just as amazing as I remembered, but I'm finding it hard to focus on the food. Jack's gaze hasn't left me since we sat down at one of the rickety

festival tables. He watches me like I'm some rare specimen, cataloging every movement.

"You have a very precise way of eating," he says, leaning forward. "You separate the components, sample each individually before combining them."

Heat creeps up my neck. "Are you seriously analyzing my eating habits?"

"Should I not?" His brow furrows. "I find your methods fascinating."

"Most people just... eat." I take another bite, suddenly self-conscious. "You're kind of intense, you know that?"

"Is that unfavorable?"

"No, it's..." I wipe my mouth with a napkin, buying time to find the right words. "Different. Most guys are either trying too hard to impress me or barely paying attention at all."

"And which would you prefer?"

"Neither." I meet his eyes, surprised by my own honesty. "This is... better. Weird, but better."

He leans even closer, and my breath catches. "Define weird."

"The way you look at me like you're memorizing everything. How you ask questions nobody else would think to ask. It should freak me out, but..."

"But?"

"But somehow it doesn't." The admission makes my chest tight. "Maybe I'm the weird one."

"You're not weird, Vanessa." The way he says my name sends shivers down my spine. "You're extraordinary."

The festival buzzes around us, but in this moment, it feels like we're in our own bubble. His intensity should send me running, but instead, I find myself drawn in, like a moth to a flame.

The night air grows cooler, and I rub my arms, wishing I'd brought a jacket. Jack notices immediately - of course he does, he notices everything.

"Are you cold?" He steps closer, his warmth radiating against my side.

"A little. But I'm fine, really."

"The temperature has dropped 8.3 degrees since sunset." He reaches for another napkin, and his fingers brush against mine.

Everything stops.

My skin tingles where he touched me, electricity shooting up my arm and spreading through my entire body. My heart pounds so loud I'm sure he can hear it. Heat floods my cheeks, and my breath catches in my chest. I've never reacted this strongly to such a simple touch before.

"Your pulse increased," he observes, those green eyes fixed on my wrist.

"How can you possibly-" I start, then shake my head. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

He's still so close, and I'm hyper-aware of every point where our bodies almost touch. The sleeve of his jacket brushes my arm as he shifts, and another shiver runs through me - this time not from the cold.

"Fascinating," he murmurs, and I swear he moves his hand closer to mine on purpose, testing my reaction. "Your skin is flushed, and your pupils are dilated."

"Do you always narrate people's physiological responses?" I try to sound annoyed, but my voice comes out breathy.

"Only when they're particularly interesting." His fingers graze my knuckles again, and my whole body feels like it's humming. "Like now."

I should pull away. I should make a joke, break this tension before it overwhelms me. Instead, I stay perfectly still, caught in whatever this is, my skin burning where he touches me.

The tension crackles between us, and Jack's fingers are still ghosting over my knuckles. His lips part slightly, and I catch myself staring at them. The festival noise fades away, and all I can hear is my own thundering heartbeat. He leans in, ever so slightly, and my body screams at me to close the distance.

Instead, my anxiety kicks in like a bucket of ice water.

"Hey, um, I saw this amazing churro stand earlier." My voice comes out higher than usual as I take a step back. "They have this chocolate dipping sauce that's to die for. Want to try it?"

Jack straightens, his head tilting in that peculiar way of his. "Is something wrong?"

"No! No, I just..." I run a hand through my hair, messing up my careful styling.

"Churros. They're... really good churros."

"I see." He doesn't sound convinced. "Lead the way."

As we walk to the dessert stand, I mentally berate myself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He was right there, perfectly positioned, probably wondering why I'm acting like a scared teenager at her first dance.

"Two churros, please," I tell the vendor, my voice still shaky. "With chocolate sauce."

"Your breathing is irregular," Jack observes. "Are you certain you're-"

"I'm fine!" I grab the churros, nearly dropping them. "Just... really excited about dessert."

He takes his churro, studying it with his usual intensity, while I try to calm my racing thoughts. Way to go, Vanessa. You had a perfect moment and you ruined it with pastries. Becca's going to laugh herself sick when she hears about this.

"The cinnamon-sugar ratio is quite precise," Jack says, and I almost want to cry at how normal he's acting while I'm having an internal meltdown.

"Yeah," I manage. "They're great."

The chocolate sauce drips onto my fingers, and I focus on that instead of the missed opportunity still hanging in the air between us.

CHAPTER 8

JACK

The street lights cast long shadows across Vanessa's face as we walk away from the food festival. Her fingers twitch near mine, but she keeps pulling back, like a dance where one partner keeps missing their cue. The scent of various cuisines lingers on our clothes – a mix of spices and sweetness that reminds me of home, though not quite the same.

"That Vietnamese coffee ice cream was interesting," I say, watching her expression soften. "The way they blend bitter and sweet – reminds me of how humans approach relationships."

"Only you would turn ice cream into an anthropology lesson." Her laugh carries through the cool evening air.

We stop at a crosswalk. The red hand blinks at us, and I notice how she shifts her weight from one foot to another. Her body language screams uncertainty – incredible how humans telegraph their emotions so clearly, yet often miss these signals in each other.

"I had a wonderful time tonight, Vanessa."

"Me too. Thanks for trying all those weird foods with me. Most guys would've stuck to the burger stand."

"I appreciate experiencing new things. It's what makes life interesting." The light changes, but I don't move. "Would you like me to walk you home?"

"I..." Her pulse quickens – I can almost hear it. "Maybe not tonight. I should probably catch the bus."

"Of course." I smile, keeping my distance despite every instinct telling me to close it. "Thank you for sharing this experience with me. It was enlightening."

"Enlightening?" She shakes her head, but she's smiling. "You really are something else, Jack."

"Good night, Vanessa."

I watch her walk toward the bus stop, noting how she glances back twice before turning the corner. The tension in her body has eased. Good. Sometimes the most effective strategy is knowing when to retreat.

Back in my apartment, I pull up the research database on my tablet. The screen's blue light illuminates my true form as I let the glamour fade – maintaining it takes energy I'd rather spend on research right now.

"Computer, analyze human cultural significance of first romantic kisses."

Thousands of results flood my screen. Movies, books, scientific studies, psychological analyses. Humans put an extraordinary amount of importance on this simple pressing of lips.

"Cross-reference with modern dating expectations and success rates."

"According to current data," the AI responds, "86% of humans remember their first

kiss with a new partner in detail, even decades later."

I scroll through countless accounts. The Empire State Building. Paris. Under fireworks. In the rain. During danger. After triumph. The patterns emerge – humans crave novelty and meaning in equal measure.

"Fascinating." I lean back in my chair, horns scraping against the leather. "They've turned a basic biological impulse into performance art."

My fingers trace through historical records. Romeo and Juliet. Gone with the Wind. Spider-Man's upside-down kiss. Each culture adds its own flourishes, but the core remains: anticipation, setting, timing.

"Display psychological impact studies."

The data streams past: dopamine levels, oxytocin release, memory formation. The science is clear – a well-executed first kiss can literally change brain chemistry.

"Computer, what percentage of failed relationships cite a disappointing first kiss as a factor?"

"Twenty-three percent."

I tap my fingers against the desk. Vanessa's previous relationships all failed. The pressure to get this right increases exponentially.

"Show me the top-rated first kiss locations in Twin Oaks."

The list appears, but I dismiss it immediately. Tourist spots and obvious choices won't work. Vanessa deserves something unique, something that speaks to who she is.

I pull up her social media history, cross-referencing her interests with local events. Art. Coffee. Independent music. The pieces start falling into place.

The city stretches below us like a constellation fallen to earth. I've led Vanessa to my favorite observation point – the rooftop of the old Miller Building, where the ambient light pollution is minimal enough to see the stars.

"How did you even find this place?" Vanessa wraps her arms around herself, and I resist the urge to offer my jacket – my elevated body temperature would make it suspiciously warm.

"I like to map the city's quiet spaces. Places where you can think." I gesture to the weathered lawn chairs I'd set up earlier. "The security guard owes me a favor for helping with his daughter's college application."

She settles into one of the chairs, tilting her head back to study the sky. "You know, I used to paint the stars. Before..."

"Before your parents made you stop pursuing art?"

"How did you—" She sits up straighter. "I never told you about that."

"You mentioned taking community college classes. The way you look at gallery windows when we walk past. The sketches on your coffee cup sleeves." I lean back, keeping my eyes on Orion's Belt. "People reveal more than they realize."

"That's..."

I turn to face her, and the city lights catch the amber flecks in her eyes. She's closer now; her chair shifted toward mine without my noticing. The scent of coffee and jasmine fills my senses – her signature perfume mixed with traces of her workplace.

"I make you nervous." Not a question. Her pulse races beneath her skin, visible at her throat.

"Yes. No." She laughs softly. "You make me curious."

Her hand finds my knee, and the touch sends electricity through my skin. I hold perfectly still, letting her set the pace. The stars wheel overhead as she leans in, hesitating just inches away.

"You're not going to analyze this moment too, are you?" Her breath fans across my face.

"I'm finding it rather difficult to analyze anything right now."

She closes the distance, and my carefully maintained control fractures. Her lips are soft, tasting of the chai tea she had earlier. I cup her face, my thumb tracing her jawline as she sighs into my mouth. The kiss deepens, and I have to concentrate to keep my glamour intact as heat floods my system.

When we break apart, her eyes stay closed for three extra heartbeats. "Wow."

"Yeah." My voice comes out rougher than intended.

"That was..." She opens her eyes, and they're darker than before. "Can we do that again?"

Instead of answering, I pull her closer, and this time there's no hesitation from either of us. The kiss is deeper, more certain. Her fingers thread through my hair. She makes a small sound in the back of her throat that sends sparks down my spine.

CHAPTER 9

VANESSA

I lose myself in the kiss, every nerve ending coming alive. His lips are impossibly soft against mine, and when his hand slides to cup my jaw, my breath catches. The city lights twinkle below us, but I'm barely aware of them anymore. All I can focus on is how Jack's thumb traces my cheekbone, how his other hand finds the small of my back.

When his tongue traces my bottom lip, a shiver runs through me. I part my lips, deepening the kiss, and he responds with a quiet groan that makes my knees weak. There's something almost reverent in the way he kisses me, like he's memorizing every sensation, every tiny movement.

His hand tangles in my hair, and I press closer, eliminating the space between us. The kiss turns hungrier, more urgent. My heart pounds so hard I wonder if he can feel it. His teeth graze my bottom lip, and I make a sound I didn't even know I was capable of.

"You're trembling," he murmurs, breaking away just enough to speak.

"Good trembling." I chase his lips, recapturing them.

The world narrows to just this: his mouth on mine, his hands in my hair, the warmth of his body against me. When we finally part for air, we're both breathing hard. His forehead rests against mine, and I keep my eyes closed, savoring the moment.

The rooftop gravel digs into my palms when he lowers us down onto his jacket. His mouth never leaves mine, hungry but controlled, like he's trying to pace this. My fingers fumble with his belt buckle—cold metal against trembling hands—until he stills them with his own.

"Vanessa." His voice comes out rough, thumb brushing my pulse point. "We don't have to?"

I bite his lower lip in answer, sharp enough to make him gasp. His composure cracks. The sound unravels something primal in my gut.

He undresses me like he's unwrapping sacred text, calloused palms skating up my thighs as he pulls off my tights. The night air licks my bare skin, but his breath on my neck burns hotter. When his teeth find that spot below my ear—the one even I didn't know about—my back arches off the makeshift bed.

"Jack." His name escapes as half plea, half prayer.

He pauses, pupils blown wide. "Tell me."

I drag his face back to mine instead. His shirt disappears somewhere between feverish kisses, warm skin flush against me. My panties follow, discarded right next to my bra.

Jack's hands explore with devastating precision. No rushed groping, no performative theatrics. Just knuckles skating up my inner thigh, fingertips fluttering against my clit, palm cradling my breast like he's weighing its worth in gold. When his mouth follows suit, hot and wet against my nipple, I fist the jacket fabric beneath us.

"Look at me." He waits until I obey before sliding his cock into me, so agonizingly slow I feel each millimeter. The stretch burns sweet. His groan rumbles through both

our chests, harmonizing with my whimper.

Our rhythm builds gradual—deep rolls of hips that shift gravel beneath the wool lining. His forehead stays pressed to mine, breathing syncing as we move. The city's glow paints sweat-slick skin mercury bright. I count his expressions between gasps: parted lips, fluttering eyelids, tendons straining in his neck.

"Good?" he asks, thumb pressing circles against my clit.

"Yes—god— please ?—"

Stars fracture behind my eyelids. His mouth swallows my cry as my nails carve half-moons into his shoulders. He follows moments later, shuddering through his climax with a choked sound that's almost human.

We lie tangled afterward, his heartbeat thundering against my sternum. His fingers absently trace nonsense patterns on my hip. I press closer, memorizing the salt-metal taste of his skin, the way his breathing hitches when I nip his jaw. Our legs entwine like roots seeking the same underground river.

I want more.

The gravel bites into my knees as I shift above him, Jack's hands still roaming my back like he's mapping undiscovered territory. His breathing hitches when my thigh brushes against him—cock already hard again, heat pressing against my inner leg. No words needed. I catch his lower lip between my teeth as I rise up, his fingers digging into my hips hard enough to bruise.

Moonlight catches the sweat sheen as I straddle him properly. The night air raises goosebumps along my spine, a sharp contrast to the furnace heat where our skin meets. I grind down once experimentally, swallowing his choked groan like it's

oxygen. His grip tightens, hips arching off the wool jacket beneath us.

Faster this time. Hungrier. My palms flatten against his pecs as I find the rhythm—short, sharp rolls of my hips that make his abdominal muscles jump beneath my thumbs. His eyes stay locked on mine, pupils swallowing the green irises whole. Every thrust jostles the gravel beneath us, the pressure of his fingers digging in my ass keeping me anchored to reality.

He sits up abruptly, surprising a gasp from me as our torsos press together. Calloused hands cup my face, his mouth claiming mine with bruising intensity. I claw at his shoulders, nails leaving red trails as he tilts my hips to change the angle. The new position sends sparks up my spine, my head falling back as he sucks a mark beneath my jaw.

"God, you—" His voice breaks when I clench around him, the muscles in his neck standing out like steel cables. My thighs tremble, the tension coiling so fast it steals my breath.

He growls something guttural against my collarbone, teeth scraping skin as another climax rips through me. The world whites out—stars above blurring with the ones behind my eyelids. I barely register his fingers digging into my hips as he follows, hips stuttering against mine with three final, brutal thrusts.

We collapse sideways onto the jacket, legs still tangled. His chest heaves against me, heart slamming against my chest in double time. I trace the crescents my nails left on his forearm, listening to our ragged breathing sync up again. His lips brush the nape of my neck—once, twice—before settling against my damp skin.

I'm too tired, too utterly satisfied to worry if I've made a mistake.

CHAPTER 10

VANESSA

I can't focus on the espresso machine. My mind keeps drifting back to last night—Jack's hands, his mouth, the way he... The milk overflows, snapping me back to reality.

"Third time you've done that today." Becca's voice carries that knowing lilt that makes my cheeks burn. "Someone got laid."

"Keep your voice down." I grab a cloth, wiping furiously at the counter. My skin tingles just thinking about how Jack's fingers felt trailing down my?—

"Oh my god, you're blushing! Was it that good?"

"I don't kiss and tell."

"Since when?" Becca leans against the counter, blocking my escape route. "You told me every excruciating detail about Trevor's premature situation."

"This is different." The cloth's getting threadbare where I'm twisting it.

"Different how?"

"I don't know. It just..." My hands tremble as I try to reload the coffee grinder. "It was intense. Too intense."

"Too intense?" Becca's eyebrows shoot up. "Like, call-the-police intense or call-your-gynecologist intense?"

"Becca!"

"What?"

I abandon the grinder, dragging her into the break room. "It was... I've never... God, I can't even describe it. The way he touched me, like he knew exactly what I needed before I did. And his focus—like I was the only thing in the universe that mattered."

"That sounds amazing. So why do you look like you're planning to flee the country?"

"Because it was perfect. And perfect things don't happen to me. Perfect things are trap doors waiting to drop me into another emotional hellscape."

"Or maybe," Becca says, poking my arm, "you finally met someone worth taking a risk for. Someone who makes you forget to overthink everything."

I press my palms against my eyes. "That's what scares me."

"How is that something to be scared of?" she asks, almost indignant. "This is what you've been waiting for! It's what you deserve!"

"Look, Becca, you don't understand." I slide down the break room wall, sitting on the cold tile floor. "Every time I think I've found someone decent, the other shoe drops. Remember Marcus?"

"The guy who said your opinions were 'cute'?"

"Yeah. Or David, who wanted me to quit my job because working with other men

made him insecure. Or Trevor?—"

"We don't talk about Trevor," Becca interrupts, sliding down next to me. "Jack's different."

My stomach flips at his name. "That's what worries me. He's so different it's scary. The way he looks at me, like he's trying to memorize every detail. The questions he asks—they're deep, meaningful. Not just the usual small talk guys use before trying to get in your pants."

"And that's... bad?"

"It's terrifying." I pull my knees to my chest. "Because if this is real, if he's actually as genuine as he seems, then I could really fall for him. And when it ends?—"

"If it ends."

"When it ends, it's going to destroy me. I can feel it." My voice cracks. "I like him so much already, Becca. The way my skin buzzes when he's near, how he makes me laugh, how safe I feel when he holds me. I haven't felt this way about anyone. Ever."

"Then maybe?—"

"And that's exactly why I should run. The higher I climb, the harder I'll fall."

Becca grabs my hand. "Or maybe you'll fly."

"When did you get so philosophical?" I try to joke, but my voice wavers.

"When my best friend started sabotaging her chance at happiness because she's scared."

The bell chimes and my heart stops. Jack walks in, looking exactly like he did before last night—composed, curious, with that same half-smile that makes my stomach flip. No hint of what happened between us, no trace of how his hands had...

"Good morning." His voice is steady, professional. "I'd like to observe your morning rush patterns, if you don't mind."

My fingers fumble with the cup I'm holding. "Our what?"

"The social dynamics during peak hours. It's fascinating how humans cluster around caffeine distribution points."

Humans. There he goes again with that weird phrasing. But instead of finding it endearing like before, it stings. Because shouldn't someone who spent last night exploring every inch of my body be a little less... clinical?

"Sure." I turn to the espresso machine, grateful for the excuse to hide my face. "The usual?"

"Please." He settles at his regular spot, notebook in hand. Like nothing's changed. Like last night never happened.

Becca slides past me, whispering, "Want me to accidentally spill something on him?"

"Just watch the line for me," I mutter, but her loyalty makes my throat tight.

I bring Jack his drink, setting it down with enough force to get his attention. He looks up, green eyes studying me with that same intellectual curiosity he gives everything else.

"Thank you. I've been wondering—do you notice any correlation between beverage

choice and relationship status?"

My jaw clenches. "Seriously?"

"Is that an inappropriate question?"

"No more inappropriate than anything else we did last night," I snap, quiet enough that only he can hear.

He blinks, tilts his head. "I assumed maintaining professional boundaries during business hours was standard protocol."

I walk away before he can see how much that hurts. Because of course—of course he'd be this rational about it. While I'm over here coming undone over a memory, he's taking notes about coffee preferences.

The morning rush dies down, and Jack's still there, scribbling in his notebook. My shoulders shake as I wipe down tables, getting closer to his corner. When I reach the table next to his, he closes his notebook.

"Vanessa."

"More observations needed?" The words come out sharper than intended.

"I apologize if I've caused offense. My behavior this morning was... inappropriate. Not the professional boundaries—those were necessary—but my failure to acknowledge what happened between us."

I pause, cloth suspended mid-wipe. "Go on."

"Would you go out with me tomorrow? I'd like to explain myself properly."

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because..." The cloth twists in my hands. "You make me feel things I'm not ready for."

"Yet you felt ready last night."

Heat rushes to my face. "That was different."

"How so?"

"It just was." I turn away, but his hand catches mine.

"I want to understand." His thumb traces circles on my palm. "Help me understand."

"There's nothing to understand. You're studying human behavior, right? Well, consider this a case study in self-preservation."

"And if I told you I'm not studying anything when I'm with you?"

My breath catches. "I'd say you're lying."

"Have I lied to you yet?"

"I..." The warmth of his hand spreads up my arm. "Fine. Dinner."

His smile reaches his eyes. "I promise you won't regret it."

CHAPTER 11

JACK

I pace my apartment, fingers drumming against the PerComm as my report sits unfinished. The words mock me from the screen: "Subject displays typical human mating behaviors..."

Delete.

My skin itches beneath this human form, but I can't shift back. Not now. Not when her scent still clings to me, when I can still taste her on my lips.

"Computer, personal log." The device chirps to life. "Last night's field research has become... complicated."

I run my hands through my hair—this strange, blonde hair that isn't mine. Dawn breaks over Twin Oaks, painting the sky in colors that remind me of home.

"The subject—" I stop, clench my jaw. "Vanessa. Her name is Vanessa."

The computer waits patiently for my input.

"I should transfer out. Request reassignment. The data is already compromised." My chest tightens at the thought. "But I won't."

The memory of her laughter, the way she arched against me under the stars, floods

back. No clinical terms could capture that moment. No anthropological framework could explain why my heart races when she looks at me.

"Computer, delete log."

I'm breaking every protocol in the handbook. Rule one: maintain emotional distance. Rule two: avoid intimate physical contact. Rule three: never develop personal attachments.

My PerComm pings with a message from Command. Probably wondering why my weekly report is late. I ignore it.

Instead, I pull up the image I captured of her last night. She's smiling, her head tucked against my chest, stars scattered behind us like diamonds on velvet. My human face looks back at me, and for the first time since taking this form, the expression feels genuine.

"Computer, new personal log." I pause, knowing these words could end my career. "I'm in love with a human. And I don't care about the consequences."

The PerComm vibrates against my desk, its screen flashing red. Priority message. I already know what it says, but I open it anyway.

"Agent Jorun, your recent field behavior has deviated significantly from protocol. Multiple violations detected: excessive personal contact, emotional entanglement, physical intimacy with subject V.W. Cease all non-observational interaction immediately."

My jaw clenches. The message continues to scroll.

"Your previous work has been exemplary, which is why you're receiving a warning

rather than immediate extraction. Return to standard observation protocols. Further deviation will result in disciplinary action."

I slam the device down, pacing the length of my apartment. The sunrise catches my reflection in the window – this human form I've worn so long it's starting to feel more real than my own skin.

"Computer, display my mission parameters."

The holographic display flickers to life: "Observe. Document. Do not interfere with natural human social development."

"Computer, display subject file: Wright, Vanessa."

Her image appears, captured from our first meeting at The Love Roast. The clinical notes scroll beside it: "Subject displays typical defensive mechanisms resulting from repeated relationship failures. Exhibits above-average intelligence and emotional awareness."

My fingers hover over the delete command. One touch and I could erase every trace of her from the official record. But that wouldn't erase her from my mind, or this ache in my chest that feels anything but scientific.

The PerComm buzzes again. Another message: "Confirmation of protocol compliance required within 24 hours."

I pick up the device, my thumb hovering over the response field. The cursor blinks, waiting for my acknowledgment, my promise to step back, to reduce her to nothing more than data points in a study.

I can't. Not yet.

I rehearse my speech as I walk to The Love Roast. The words taste like ash in my mouth: "Vanessa, I need to focus on my work." Or maybe: "This is moving too fast." All the standard human break-up lines I've documented over months of research.

My PerComm buzzes. Another message from Command, no doubt. I silence it without looking.

The café's pink and red Valentine's decorations mock me through the window. Vanessa moves behind the counter, her dark hair catching the morning light. She's explaining something to a customer, her hands animated, a slight smile playing at her lips.

My rehearsed speech evaporates.

I push open the door. The smell of coffee and freshly baked pastries mingles with her perfume.

I steady myself, falling back into my normal pattern of interaction with her.

"Good morning. I'd like to observe your morning rush patterns, if you don't mind."

"Our what?" she asks, something bitter in her voice.

"The social dynamics during peak hours. It's fascinating how humans cluster around caffeine distribution points."

It soon becomes apparent I said, or did, something wrong. She's cold to me in a way I've never felt before. As the morning rush continues, I observe as her jaw clenches and her muscles stiffen when she glances at me.

Once the full house of customers thins out, I decide to make my move. Her speech is

stilted and full of anger; not the way I want this conversation to go.

"I apologize if I've caused offense. My behavior this morning was... inappropriate. Not the professional boundaries—those were necessary—but my failure to acknowledge what happened between us."

"Go on." The tension from her is so thick, yet I can sense a need from her to hear me out.

"Would you go out with me tomorrow? I'd like to explain myself properly."

I try, and though she seems open to it, her words show she's still hanging onto some form of bitterness. Despite it all, I need her to understand. To know how much I care for her.

So, I broach the topic of another date. One more personal, that can let me have that time I need to talk to her.

"Fine. Dinner." Vanessa is still showing signs of being closed off, but there's a hint of hope in her speech.

"I promise you won't regret it."

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CHAPTER 12

VANESSA

I step into the pristine kitchen, my fingers fidgeting with the strings of the borrowed apron. The space is intimate - just two cooking stations set up with gleaming utensils and fresh ingredients.

"I should warn you, I burn water," I say, eyeing the sharp knives warily. "My culinary expertise ends at pouring coffee."

Jack's hand brushes my lower back as he guides me to our station. "That's why we're here. I thought it would be interesting to observe- I mean, to learn something new together."

"Is that what anthropologists do for fun? Study people while they fail at cooking?"

"Only the fascinating ones." His eyes lock with mine, sending a flutter through my stomach that has nothing to do with food.

The instructor, a petite woman with graying hair, claps her hands. "Today we're making coq au vin! First, let's break down our chickens."

"Break down?" My knife hovers uncertainly over the bird. "I usually just order mine pre-broken."

Jack's chest presses against my back as he positions my hands on the knife. "Like

this. Follow the joint line." His fingers guide mine with surprising precision.

"You seem to know what you're doing."

"Basic survival skills." He pauses. "From field research."

The chicken comes apart under our combined effort. His touch lingers longer than necessary, and I find myself leaning into him.

"Now for the vegetables," the instructor calls out.

I attack an onion with more enthusiasm than skill. Tears stream down my face. "God, I'm a mess."

"Here." Jack hands me his handkerchief - who even carries those anymore? "You're doing fine. Better than most hu- better than most first-timers."

The warmth in his voice makes me forget about my stinging eyes. I turn to face him, finding him much closer than expected. A smudge of flour dusts his cheek, making him look oddly vulnerable.

"You know," I say, reaching up to brush it away, "for someone who studies people, you're pretty hard to figure out yourself."

His hand catches mine before I can pull it back. The kitchen fades away, leaving just us and the electric current running between our skin.

"Now we deglaze."

The wine splashes into the pan, steam rising with a rich aroma. Jack's hand covers mine on the wooden spoon, adjusting my stirring technique.

"Slower," he murmurs near my ear. "Let it reduce naturally."

My skin tingles where his fingers rest. "You seem to know an awful lot about French cooking for someone who studies people for a living."

"I find food preparation across different cultures a topic of great importance." His thumb traces a small circle on my wrist. "The intimacy of sharing meals, the trust involved in preparing food for others..."

I swallow hard, trying to focus on the bubbling sauce. "Is this part of your research too?"

"No." His other hand settles on my hip, steadying me as he reaches past for the herbs. "This is just for us."

The thyme crumbles between his fingers into the pan. Each time he moves, his chest brushes my back. The kitchen feels ten degrees warmer.

"The carrots need turning," I manage to say.

"Show me how you'd do it."

I reach for the pan handle, but he doesn't step back. Instead, his arms cage me in as I flip the vegetables. His fingers brush mine as he adjusts the heat.

"Perfect," he says, and I'm not sure if he means the carrots or something else.

The instructor's voice seems distant as she explains the next steps. The only thing on my mind is Jack's presence, the way his hands keep finding excuses to touch mine - passing ingredients, demonstrating techniques, steadying the cutting board. Each contact sends electricity through my veins.

"Your heart's racing," he observes quietly, his fingers resting on my pulse point as we wait for the sauce to thicken.

"Must be the heat from the stove," I lie, not meeting his eyes.

His low chuckle tells me he doesn't believe me for a second.

The rich aroma of coq au vin fills the small dining area as we plate our creation. Jack's fingers brush mine as he passes me the garnish.

"Not bad for someone who claims to burn water," he says, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"I had help." I arrange the thyme sprigs, probably with more attention than necessary.

"Though I'm still suspicious of your 'field research' cooking skills."

"Perhaps I moonlight as a secret chef." He ladles the sauce with precise movements.

"Studying human culture by day, mastering French cuisine by night. Though I must admit, my research methods have become... less conventional lately."

I take a bite of the chicken, letting the flavors bloom on my tongue. "Is that your scholarly way of saying I'm a distraction?"

"You're more of an... unexpected variable." His eyes lock with mine over his wine glass. "One I find myself unwilling to eliminate from the equation."

Heat creeps up my neck. "Now you're just showing off with the academic talk."

"Is it working?"

I kick his foot under the table. "Maybe."

We eat between loaded glances and light touches, our conversation drifting between playful banter and comfortable silence. Every time our eyes meet, the air seems to crackle with unspoken possibilities.

The night air nips at my exposed arms as we walk down my street, but Jack's warmth beside me keeps the chill at bay. Our shoulders bump occasionally, sending little sparks through my body each time.

I pause at my building's steps, fishing for my keys. The streetlight catches the remnants of flour still dusting his shirt. "Would you like to come up for some... coffee?"

Jack's eyes darken, and he takes a half-step closer.

Instead of answering, he leans down and captures my mouth with his. The kiss is different from our rooftop encounter - slower, deeper, more deliberate. His other hand slides into my hair, cradling the back of my head as he angles me just so. My keys clatter to the ground, forgotten as I grip his shirt.

He tastes like the wine from dinner, rich and intoxicating. My back meets the cool brick of my building as he presses closer, his body a solid wall of heat against mine. When he finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard.

CHAPTER 13

JACK

I push her through the doorway, my hands already tangled in her hair, her fingers clawing at the back of my shirt. The door slams shut behind us, the sound echoing sharper than it should. The apartment's dim glow—just the city light filtering through the blinds—illumes her face, her lips swollen, her cheeks flushed.

“Big plans for tonight?” I mouth against her ear, nipping at the lobe. She shivers, her hands slipping up my chest to lock around my neck.

“Wasn’t expecting company,” she breathes, her voice a low hum, tinged with a laugh.

My fingers trace her waist, her ribs, the curve of her hips. Every touch sends a jolt through both of us. Her breath catches when my hands skim the edge of her shirt, her nails digging into my shoulders in response.

We’re a tangle of limbs and fabric and desperate, wet kisses through the apartment. Her back hits the bed, and she pulls me down with her, her legs hooking around my hips. I press into her, slow, deliberate, the friction sparking between us.

Her hands are under my shirt now, her palms tracing the planes of my back, clawing down my spine. Every touch ignites something hotter, sharper, until I’m blind with it. I yank her dress off, the fabric ripping in my haste, and she gasps, the sound swallowed by my mouth.

Her skin is hot under my hands, her pulse pounding against my fingertips. I'm on fire, burning through every rule, every protocol, every rational thought. She arches into me, her lips parting on a breathless "Yes," and I know I'm gone, completely, irrevocably gone.

I feel her hands at my waist, the buttons of my jeans popping open one by one. My cock springs out, and her eyes go wide like she's looking at dessert. The air is thick with tension, the space between us charged. "Vanessa," I start, but she cuts me off with a look, her eyes locked on mine.

"Let me," she says, her voice steady, yet soft. There's a vulnerability there, something beneath the surface that makes me pause, makes me want to understand her better.

I don't say anything else. My fingers tighten in her hair as she lowers her head, her breath warm against my cock. The first touch sends a shiver through me, and I close my eyes, focusing on the sensations she creates.

I can feel her intent in every movement, every pressure. She's not just doing this; she's pouring herself into it, each swipe of her tongue deliberate.

The room is quiet, save for the sounds of our breathing, the faint hum of the city outside. It's intimate, the kind of moment that feels like it could stretch on forever. I'm acutely aware of her, of how this moment connects us beyond words.

I open my eyes, looking down at her, her form illuminated by the city light. She glances up, our eyes meeting, and I see something there, a flicker of emotion that makes my chest tighten.

"Vanessa," I say again, softer this time. She doesn't respond, just keeps her eyes on mine while she bobs her head up and down, her movements steady. I can feel the intensity building, the edge of control slipping.

I want to step back, to slow down, but I can't. Not now. Not with her looking at me like that. I feel myself getting closer, the pressure rising, and I know I should warn her, but the words catch in my throat.

Then it's too late. I mutter a curse, the release hitting me hard, and I'm digging my fingers into her shoulders, holding her steady. She stays with me until the end, her touch gentle, her presence grounding.

When I finally open my eyes, she's sitting back on her heels, her hair a little mussed, her lips swollen. She looks up at me, a small smile playing on her lips. "Alright?" she asks, her voice tinged with amusement.

I nod, still catching my breath. "Yeah."

I pull her close, my hands cradling her face as I lower myself over her. She looks up at me, her eyes soft but charged with something unspoken. I can feel the heat between us, a magnetic pull that's impossible to ignore. My mouth meets hers, slower now, deeper, like I'm trying to breathe her in.

Her arms wrap around my waist, her fingers tracing the small of my back. I shift my weight, settling against her, the friction sending a shiver through both of us. She arches slightly, her legs parting, and I slide my hand down, my fingers brushing against her slit. She's ready, wet, and trembling under my touch.

"Vanessa," I murmur, my voice low, rough. "Look at me." Her eyes flicker open, locked on mine. I push my cock in her slowly, deliberately. She exhales sharply, her hands gripping my arms, her nails digging in.

The room fades out except for the two of us. Her breath catches, hiccupping, as I move, steady, unrelenting. Her eyes never leave mine, even when they start to gloss over, even when her lips part on a soundless cry.

I feel her tighten around me, her body coiling like a spring. She gasps, her head tilting back, and I follow her, my mouth tracing her neck, my teeth grazing her skin. She comes with a sharp, exquisite shudder, her hands clawing at me, pulling me closer. I let go then, letting the wave take me, my release blinding, earth-shattering.

I collapse next to her, the only sound the rapid beat of our hearts. Her fingers drift through my hair, tentative, gentle. I bury my face in her shoulder, her scent flooding my senses. The world outside doesn't matter. Nothing matters but this—her, me, the way we fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

And in this moment, I know I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER 14

JACK

I sit at my desk, staring at the glowing screen before me. My research notes are a mess - scattered between actual anthropological observations and increasingly personal reflections about Vanessa. Instead of analyzing human mating patterns, I find myself typing "how to know when you love someone" into the search bar.

The results flood my screen. Racing heart. Constant thoughts. Physical reactions to their presence. Desire to make them happy. I close my eyes, remembering how my skin tingles when she touches me, how my chest tightens when she laughs.

"This is compromising the mission," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. But the words feel hollow now. The mission seems less important with each passing day, each moment spent with her.

I pull up my research logs, trying to focus. The cursor blinks accusingly at me. I should be documenting our interactions clinically, noting patterns and behaviors. Instead, I'm remembering the way she curled into me afterward, her breath evening out against my chest.

My communicator chirps - another warning from my superiors. I ignore it. They don't understand. They can't understand how she's different, how she makes me question everything I thought I knew about humans. About myself.

I open a new document and start typing:

"Subject shows remarkable capacity for emotional depth while maintaining strong boundaries. Intelligence manifests in subtle ways. Approach to life demonstrates..."

I delete it all. I can't pretend anymore. Can't reduce her to data points and observations. She's Vanessa. She's the way she rolls her eyes at bad jokes but laughs anyway. She's the slight tremor in her hands when she's nervous but trying not to show it. She's the fierce pride when she talks about making it on her own.

For the first time in my career, I don't know how to document what I'm experiencing. How do you quantify the way your world shifts when someone walks into a room?

I pace my apartment, the weight of my secret pressing down on me. My true form itches beneath this human disguise. Each time I'm with Vanessa, the urge to show her who I really am grows stronger.

"Hey, by the way, I'm actually a Vakutan warrior studying human behavior," I practice saying to my reflection. The words sound ridiculous even to me. But keeping this from her feels worse with each passing day.

I sink into my couch, running through our last encounter. The way she trusted me, opened up to me. The vulnerability in her eyes when she talked about her fears. And here I am, hiding the most fundamental truth about myself.

My communicator beeps again. Another message from command, probably. I ignore it. They'd tell me to terminate the relationship, stick to the mission parameters. But they don't understand what I've found here. What she means to me.

I pull out my research tablet, scrolling through articles about human relationships. Trust. Honesty. Communication. Everything I read tells me relationships built on lies eventually crumble. But would knowing the truth hurt her more?

The memory of her laugh echoes in my mind, the way she teases me about being "like an alien sometimes." If she only knew how right she was. Would she run? Would she think everything between us was fake?

"It wasn't fake," I whisper to my empty apartment. "None of it was fake."

My fingers trace the edge of my tablet, where I've stored countless observations about human behavior. But Vanessa isn't just another data point anymore. She deserves to know who she's really with, what she's really feeling when she touches me.

The thought of losing her makes my chest tight. But the thought of continuing to deceive her feels even worse.

I finally open the messages on my communicator, each one more severe than the last.

"Agent status: compromised."

"Mission parameters: exceeded."

"Emotional entanglement: detected."

"Final warning: Extract imminent."

The last one makes my blood run cold. The clinical language can't mask the threat beneath. I've seen extractions before - agents yanked mid-mission, their human lives erased without a trace. No goodbyes. No explanations. Just... gone.

But those agents are normally guilty of things far worse than a date or two. Like exposing multiple humans to their true form, engaging in violence, or trying to interfere in human politics.

Surely, falling in love doesn't count among those wrongs?

My fingers trace the edge of my desk as I read the final message again:

"Your behavior patterns indicate dangerous deviation from mission objectives. Personal involvement with subject V.W. has exceeded acceptable parameters. You have 48 hours to resume standard observation protocols or immediate extraction will commence. This is not a request."

I slam my fist on the desk, hard enough to crack the wood. In my frustration, my form slips - red skin bleeding through my human disguise before I catch myself. Years of training, of discipline, of putting the mission first... all undone by a woman who makes terrible puns and draws hearts in coffee foam.

But they're right. I'm compromised. Every time I see her, I forget why I'm here. Instead of studying human behavior, I'm lost in the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when she's nervous. Instead of maintaining professional distance, I'm planning ways to make her smile.

The choice looms before me: my duty or my heart. Everything I've worked for, everything I am, against everything I've discovered I could be. With her.

My communicator buzzes again. Another message:

"Countdown initiated. 47:52:13 remaining."

The numbers tick down, each second pulling me closer to a decision I'm not ready to make. My training says duty. My heart...

My heart says Vanessa.

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CHAPTER 15

VANESSA

I fidget with my coffee cup, unable to contain my smile as Becca leans across our usual corner table at The Love Roast. "Spill. Everything."

"These past two nights with Jack..." Heat rises to my cheeks. "God, Bec. I've never felt anything like it."

"Details. Now." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"The first time was on this rooftop. We were stargazing, and he knew all these constellations I'd never heard of. The way he explained them..." I bite my lip. "Then he kissed me, and it was like... electricity. Pure electricity."

"And then?"

My face burns hotter. "Let's just say the stars weren't the only spectacular view that night."

"Vanessa Wright! You little minx." Becca claps her hands. "And the second time?"

"He took me to this private cooking class. The whole time, his hands kept brushing against mine while we chopped vegetables. The way he looked at me..." I trail off, remembering how safe I felt in his arms. "We barely made it through my front door."

"Girl." Becca grabs my hands. "This is different. I can see it in your face."

"It is. He makes me feel... wanted. Really wanted. Not just physically, but like he sees me. All of me."

"So..." Becca draws out the word. "Are you two official?"

The smile slips from my face. "I don't know. We haven't talked about it."

"Why not? He's clearly into you."

"Because... What if I'm reading too much into this? What if it's just casual for him?"

"Have you seen how he looks at you? That man is not casual about anything, especially not you."

"Maybe. I just... I can't handle another disappointment, Bec."

"When was the last time you let yourself actually feel something?" Becca's words cut through my defenses. "And don't give me that look – I've known you long enough to see the difference."

I trace the rim of my coffee cup, avoiding her gaze. "It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? Every guy before Jack, you had one foot out the door from day one. Always ready with reasons why it wouldn't work."

"Because they proved me right every time!" The words burst out louder than intended. I lower my voice. "Remember Derek? Or Michael? Or-"

"This isn't about them." Becca reaches across the table, stilling my fidgeting hands.

"This is about Jack. When he walks in here, your whole energy changes. You light up."

My chest tightens because she's right. "It's only been a few weeks, but I do trust him," I whisper, surprising myself with the admission. "That's what scares me. I've never... with anyone else, I always kept part of myself hidden. Protected. But with Jack..."

"With Jack?"

"He asks these weird questions sometimes, like he's trying to understand everything about me. And instead of deflecting like I usually do, I find myself answering. Really answering." I wrap my hands around my cup, seeking its warmth. "Last night, we were cooking together, and he asked me about my dreams – not the usual small talk kind of way. He wanted to know what scared me about them, what made me hesitate to chase them."

"And?"

"And I told him. Everything. About dropping out of art school, about my parents, about feeling stuck." My voice catches. "No one's ever made me feel so... safe being vulnerable."

My fingers start to tremble as a wave of emotions wash over me.

"Oh god." I press my hands to my face, the realization hitting me. "Oh god, oh god."

"What?" Becca leans forward, concerned.

"I think..." The words stick on my tongue. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape. "I think I'm falling in love with him."

"Finally! She admits it!"

"No, you don't understand." I grab her arm. "I can't be in love with him. I swore I wouldn't do this again. I had a plan - work, school, getting my life together."

"Plans change."

"But this wasn't supposed to happen." My voice cracks. "He walks into a room and my whole body just... responds. When he's not around, I catch myself checking my phone for messages. I keep finding things I want to tell him about - stupid little things that remind me of our conversations."

"That's what falling in love feels like."

"Last night, he was telling me about this obscure anthropological theory, and his eyes got all bright and passionate. I wasn't even listening to the words anymore - I was just watching his face, thinking how beautiful he looked when he cares about something." I press my forehead against the cool table. "I'm so screwed."

"Why is this a bad thing?"

I lift my head. "Because what if he doesn't feel the same way? What if this is just an interesting experiment for him? He's always asking these questions about relationships and love like he's studying them."

"Or maybe he's trying to understand you better because he cares."

The thought makes my chest ache with hope. "When he touches me, Bec... it's like he's memorizing every inch. Like I'm precious. No one's ever made me feel like that before."

"Then maybe instead of fighting it, you should let yourself fall."

I wrap my arms around myself, remembering how it feels when Jack holds me. "I already am. God help me, I already am."

"You need to tell him," Becca says, squeezing my hand.

I pull back, shaking my head. "I can't just blurt out 'I love you' over coffee."

"Why not? Sometimes the simplest way is best."

"Because..." I twist my napkin into knots. "What if he gets that deer-in-headlights look? You know the one - when guys realize things are getting too serious and suddenly remember they have to wash their hair or feed their goldfish?"

"Jack doesn't strike me as the type to run."

"No?" I raise an eyebrow. "Then why hasn't he defined what we are? We've been seeing each other for weeks."

"Maybe he's waiting for you to bring it up."

The thought stops me cold. Have I been giving him mixed signals? Every time he gets close to something real, do I deflect with a joke or change the subject?

"Look at me." Becca's voice turns serious. "You deserve to be happy. And if Jack makes you happy, he deserves to know how you feel."

I trace the heart pattern on my coffee cup, remembering how Jack's fingers felt intertwined with mine. "What if it changes everything?"

"It will. That's the point."

The truth of her words settles in my chest. I'm tired of playing it safe, of keeping one foot out the door. Jack deserves more than that. I deserve more.

"Okay." I straighten my shoulders, determination replacing fear. "Next time I see him, I'll tell him."

"Promise?"

"Promise." The word comes out stronger than I expected. "No more hiding."

Becca beams at me. "That's my girl."

CHAPTER 16

JACK

I pace my apartment, the warning message from my superiors burning in my mind like a brand. The stark text on my communicator haunts me: "Final warning. Complete mission parameters or face extraction."

My fist clenches. They don't understand. How could they? We're supposed to be studying humans, learning their ways, but all they see are test subjects. Numbers. Data points.

But Vanessa... she's so much more than that.

I slam my hand against the wall, the pain barely registering. Images flash through my mind - things I've heard whispered in dark corners of Project Veritas. Humans disappearing without a trace. Memory wipes that leave shells of people behind. The underground markets where some end up, traded like commodities.

"Fuck!" The word explodes from my mouth, so human, so raw.

My communicator buzzes again. Another message: "Subject 2749 shows concerning levels of attachment. Recommend immediate intervention."

Subject 2749. That's what they call her. Like she's just another specimen in their grand experiment. Like she doesn't light up when she talks about art. Like she doesn't have that little crinkle in her nose when she laughs. Like she isn't the most real thing

I've ever known.

I transform into my true form, getting a look at myself in the window - dark red skin, black eyes, horns. This is what I am. What she can never see. Because if she did... if they found out she knew...

The stories echo in my head. The "cleanup protocols." The "memory adjustments." The "subject relocations." Pretty words for ugly things. I've seen the aftermath - blank stares, broken lives, people who just... vanish.

Not Vanessa. I won't let them touch her. Won't let them turn her into another statistic, another "contained variable."

But how long can I protect her? How long before they decide I'm compromised? Before they send someone else to "handle" the situation?

I grab my phone, thumb hovering over Vanessa's number. One text. That's all it would take to start pulling away. To protect her.

My fingers shake. The words blur on the screen.

Sorry, can't make it tonight. Work emergency.

Delete.

Need to focus on my research for a while.

Delete.

Think we should take a break.

Delete.

I hurl the phone across the room. It bounces off the couch with a soft thud. The thought of not seeing her smile, not hearing her laugh, not watching her eyes light up when she talks about her art - it tears something open inside me.

Distance. That's what logic dictates. That's what keeps her safe. That's what the mission requires.

But my body refuses to cooperate. My heart pounds in my chest like it's trying to break free. My skin burns with the memory of her touch. Even now, I can smell her perfume - that mix of coffee and vanilla that clings to her clothes.

I pace the length of my apartment, five steps one way, five steps back. Each time I pass the phone, it calls to me. Each time I ignore it, the pain gets worse.

The smart play is clear. Pull back. Create space. Let her think I'm just another failed romance. Let her hate me a little. It would hurt her, yes, but a clean break now is better than what could happen if my superiors decide to intervene.

But everything in me screams against it. Every cell rebels at the thought of causing her pain. Of being the reason that guardedness returns to her eyes. Of watching her walls go back up.

I stand across the street from The Love Roast, hidden in the shadow of a bookstore awning. The morning rush hits full swing, and through the window I watch Vanessa move behind the counter. Her ponytail swings as she works the espresso machine, but her movements lack their usual grace. Her shoulders slump. Dark circles ring her eyes.

Three days since I stopped answering her texts. Three days of watching that spark

fade from her face.

A customer says something and Vanessa forces a smile - the kind that doesn't reach her eyes. My chest aches. I did that. I put that emptiness there.

She checks her phone during a lull, and I know she's looking for messages from me. My own phone weighs heavy in my pocket, filled with her unanswered texts. Each one cuts deeper than the last.

Hey, haven't heard from you...

Is everything okay?

Jack?

Did I do something wrong?

The last one came this morning: I guess I got my answer.

My fingers itch to respond, to tell her everything. To rush across that street, take her in my arms, explain why I've gone silent. But I can't. Because the moment I do, she becomes a liability. A threat to the project. And I know exactly what happens to threats.

I cross the street, each step heavier than the last. The door pushes back as I enter - a sound that used to make my heart leap. Now it's just another nail in the coffin.

Vanessa's head snaps up, hope flashing across her face before uncertainty takes over. "Jack?"

"Hey." I keep my voice flat, emotionless. Clinical. Like she's just another subject in

my research.

"Where have you been? I was worried-"

"Been busy." I cut her off, hating how her face falls. "Look, we need to talk."

She grips the counter, knuckles white. "Okay..."

"This isn't working for me." The words taste like ash. "I don't see it going anywhere."

"What?" Her voice cracks. "But I thought... we were..."

"You thought wrong." Each word is a knife, but I force them out anyway. "It was fun, but that's all it was."

The light dies in her eyes. That beautiful spark I love - loved - flickers and fades. She takes a step back, arms crossing over her chest like armor.

"Right. Of course." Her voice turns brittle. "Anything else?"

"No." I turn away before I can see the tears I hear in her voice. "That's all."

The bell chimes again as I leave, and it takes everything I have not to look back.

CHAPTER 17

VANESSA

My hands shake as I write "Happy V-Day!" on yet another pink heart-shaped cup. The line at The Love Roast stretches to the door, a sea of lovesick faces that make my stomach churn.

"Grande caramel latte for Mike!" I call out, forcing a smile that feels like it might crack my face.

A week. A whole week since Jack looked at me with those cold eyes and told me it wasn't going anywhere. The same Jack who'd held me like I was precious, who'd made me feel safe enough to let my walls down.

"Vanessa, we need more heart sprinkles!" Julia shouts from behind the counter.

I nod mechanically, heading to the storage room. The boxes blur before my eyes. What happened? Everything was perfect—the rooftop, the cooking class, the way he'd study me like I was fascinating. Then suddenly, nothing. Like a switch flipped.

"Hey! Vanessa! What's going on?" Becca waves her hand in front of my face. "That's the third time you've grabbed the wrong syrup. What's going on up there?"

"Sorry, I just..." I grab a handful of paper cups, dropping half of them. "It doesn't make sense. You saw us together. He was different."

"Maybe that's why he ran." Becca helps me pick up the cups. "Some guys can't handle real connection."

But that's not it. I've seen enough fake guys to know the difference. Jack's withdrawal wasn't about fear of commitment—it was something else. The way he'd practically flinched when I reached for him, like he was fighting himself.

"Order up!" Julia's voice cuts through my thoughts.

I'm restocking the display case when someone taps a spoon against a coffee mug. The cafe falls quiet.

"Amanda," a guy in a blue suit drops to one knee in front of his girlfriend's table. "Will you marry me?"

The girl gasps, hands flying to her mouth. Everyone around them starts cooing and pulling out phones.

My chest tightens. I grip the edge of the counter, forcing myself to breathe. The happy couple embraces as their audience breaks into applause.

"Free heart cookies for everyone!" Julia announces, caught up in the moment.

I duck into the back room, pretending to grab more napkins. The storage shelves blur through my tears. A week ago, I'd imagined a future with Jack. Now I'm hiding from a stranger's proposal.

Becca follows me in. "Hey, you okay?"

"What did I do wrong?" My voice cracks. "Everything was perfect. We connected. He looked at me like..." I wipe my eyes with my apron. "Was I too much? Too

intense? Did I say something wrong?"

"Stop that." Becca grabs my shoulders. "You didn't do anything wrong. That man was crazy about you. Something else is going on."

"Then why won't he talk to me? Why act like none of it mattered?"

Outside, the newly engaged couple poses for pictures. The ring catches the light, sending sparkles across the cafe's pink and red decorations. The girl can't stop smiling, and her fiancé looks at her like she's his whole world.

Just like Jack used to look at me.

An hour later, I'm wiping down tables when the door chimes. My heart stops.

Jack bursts in, his usual composed demeanor shattered. His hair's a mess, like he's been running his hands through it repeatedly. His eyes dart around the café before landing on me.

"Vanessa." His voice is rough, urgent. He crosses the space between us in three long strides. "I need you to come with me. Now."

My dish rag drops to the table. After a week of silence, after breaking my heart, he just walks in here and?—

"Are you kidding me?" I back away, bumping into a chair. "You ignore me for days and now you expect me to just?—"

"Please." His hand reaches for mine but stops short. There's something in his eyes I've never seen before. Fear? "I know I hurt you. I know I don't deserve to ask anything of you. But this is important."

"Everything okay over here?" Becca appears at my side, arms crossed.

Jack's jaw tightens. "We don't have time for?—"

"Time for what?" I snap. "You made yourself pretty clear last week. What could possibly be so urgent now?"

He runs a hand down his face, and for a second, I swear his skin looks... different. But then he's grabbing my wrist, his touch sending electricity through my body despite everything.

"Please trust me one last time."

The raw desperation in his voice makes my knees weak. This isn't the controlled, confident Jack I know. This is someone else entirely—someone terrified.

"Vanessa, don't you dare go anywhere with him," Becca warns.

My heart pounds like a drum as I stare at Jack's hand. The cafe's pink and red decorations blur at the edges of my vision, the cheerful Valentine's music turning into white noise.

"I..." The words won't come out. A week ago, I would've followed him anywhere. Now? His touch burns with memories of everything we shared, everything he threw away.

"Let go of her." Becca's voice sounds far away.

Jack's fingers tremble against my skin. His eyes keep darting to the windows, scanning the street outside like he's expecting someone—or something. I've never seen him like this. The confident anthropologist who charmed me with strange

questions about human behavior is gone, replaced by someone who looks haunted.

"Please." His voice drops to a whisper. "I know you have no reason to trust me. But I need you to."

My legs feel like jelly. The fluorescent lights above us flicker. Once. Twice. Jack's grip tightens.

I yank my hand back, stumbling into the counter. The coffee grinder rattles behind me, and a heart-shaped cookie display crashes to the floor. The sound makes me jump.

"Vanessa?" Becca touches my shoulder. "Should I call security?"

Security. Right. That would be the sensible thing to do. But nothing about this feels sensible. The way Jack's looking at me—desperate, pleading, scared—it's real. Too real.

"Why?" My voice comes out smaller than I intended.

"I can't—" He runs his hands through his hair again, making it stand up at odd angles. "Not here. There's too much to explain, and we don't have time."

The bell above the door chimes. Jack's head snaps toward the sound so fast I hear his neck crack. His whole body tenses like a wire about to snap.

I press myself against the counter, my heart trying to escape through my throat. What happened to my nice, normal Valentine's Day of serving coffee and wallowing in self-pity? What happened to the Jack I thought I knew?

CHAPTER 18

JACK

I grip Vanessa's hand, pulling her through the back door of The Love Roast into the alley. My heart pounds against my ribs. Her skin is warm against mine, and I fight the urge to shift back to my natural state. To show her everything.

"Jack, what's going on? You're scaring me." Her voice trembles. The same voice that's haunted my dreams for weeks.

The brick wall provides cover, but I scan the rooftops anyway. They could be watching. Could already be here. I've broken protocol completely, but I can't let them take her.

"Listen to me." I cup her face in my hands, memorizing every detail - the flecks of gold in her chestnut eyes, the small scar above her lip from a childhood accident she told me about on our third date. "I've been lying to you since the day we met."

She tries to pull away, but I hold her steady. Not roughly - never roughly with her.

"I'm not who you think I am. I'm not..." The words won't form. How do you tell someone their entire understanding of reality is wrong? "I'm not from here. Not just Twin Oaks - I mean Earth."

Her pulse races under my fingers. I can feel it, see it in the way her throat moves as she swallows.

"Everything between us was real. Every moment, every touch, every word - that was all real. But my name isn't Jack Tanner. I'm not an anthropologist - well, I am, but not the kind you're thinking of."

"What are you talking about?" Her voice cracks. This is my worst fear - seeing that trust shatter in her eyes. The trust I worked so hard to earn.

I let my hands drop to my sides. "I'm Jorun. I'm part of a research team studying human culture. And I've broken every rule by falling in love with you."

I close my eyes, knowing this will change everything. The familiar tingle of transformation ripples across my skin as I let my human disguise fade. The pressure around my skull releases as my horns emerge, and my bones shift subtly beneath muscle that's now a deep crimson.

"Look at me, Vanessa."

She gasps, stumbling backward until she hits the brick wall. Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes wide with shock - but not screaming. Not running. Just... staring.

"This is who I really am." My voice is deeper now, more resonant without the human vocal constraints. "I'm Vakutan. We've been studying Earth cultures for decades, trying to understand how humans think, how they love."

Her chest rises and falls rapidly. I can hear her heartbeat from here - the enhanced senses are another thing I had to dull in human form.

"The coffee shop questions. The weird dates. All those things you said were different about me..." She presses her palms against the wall behind her, as if seeking something solid to hold onto.

"I was gathering data. At first." I take a step closer, relieved when she doesn't flinch away. "But you changed everything. You made me question my mission, my purpose. Made me feel things I never thought possible."

My black eyes meet hers, and I fight the urge to shift back to my human form, to give her something familiar to hold onto. But she needs to see the truth. All of it.

"Your eyes..." She reaches up, hand trembling, but stops short of touching my face. "They're like looking into space."

"They see more than human eyes. Different wavelengths, deeper colors." I catch her hovering hand in mine, letting her feel the different texture of my skin. "I can see how your aura changes when you're happy, when you're scared. Right now, it's... both."

Her face drains of color as she stares at me, and my hearts clench. I've seen that look before - in research footage, in documentation of first contact gone wrong. Pure, primal fear of the unknown.

"This can't be real." She shakes her head, pressing herself further against the wall. "I'm dreaming. Or having a breakdown. You're not... you can't be..."

"Everything I felt was real." I reach for her, but she jerks away. The movement hits me like a physical blow. "The questions about love, relationships - yes, that started as research. But you changed everything."

"Changed everything?" Her laugh is sharp, brittle. "I was your lab rat. Your... your human experiment."

"No." The word comes out more forcefully than I intend. "You were the variable I never accounted for. The one who made me question what I thought I knew about

humans - about myself."

She wraps her arms around herself, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I trusted you. I was going to tell you I loved you."

The past tense cuts deep. "Vanessa, please. I love you. That's why I'm here, why I'm showing you this. They're coming for me - my superiors. I have to leave Earth, and I want you to come with me."

"Come with you?" She looks at me like I'm insane. Maybe I am. "To where? Space? Another planet?"

"To my home. To show them, to explain." I take a step closer, encouraged when she doesn't back away. "I know it's asking the impossible. I know it's crazy. But I can't leave you behind."

Her eyes search my face - my real face - as if trying to find traces of the man she knew. "How do I know this isn't another lie?"

"Because I'm risking everything to tell you the truth." I hold out my hand, letting her see the stark difference between us. "I'm breaking every protocol, violating every rule - because you matter more than my mission. More than anything."

CHAPTER 19

VANESSA

My legs won't move. They should move. Every cell in my body screams at me to run, but I'm frozen, staring at... at...

This can't be real. The red skin. Those horns. Those pitch-black eyes that somehow still look at me with Jack's intensity. But it's not Jack. Jack doesn't exist. Jack was a lie.

A hysterical laugh bubbles up in my throat. All those weird questions. The way he moved during laser tag. How he always seemed to be studying everything. God, I'm such an idiot.

"Vanessa." His voice is still Jack's voice, and that makes it worse. So much worse. "Please-"

"Don't." The word comes out as a whisper. My fingers shake as I raise them between us. "Don't come near me."

The world spins. The brick wall of the alley scrapes against my palm as I steady myself. The rough texture grounds me for a moment - this is real, this is happening. The morning rush hour traffic continues just yards away. People walking past the alley entrance, oblivious. Normal people living their normal lives while my reality crumbles.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe when I open them, this will all be a hallucination. Too much coffee. Too little sleep. Anything but this.

But when I look again, he's still there. Still red-skinned. Still horned. Still looking at me with those impossible black eyes.

My chest tightens. I can't breathe. The vision blurs, and my knees buckle. This isn't happening. This isn't happening. This isn't-

A sound escapes me - something between a sob and a scream, but I clamp my hand over my mouth before it can fully form. People would come running. People would see him. See this. And then what?

I need to run. I need to get away. But my body won't cooperate. I'm trapped between fight and flight, stuck in a frozen limbo of disbelief and terror.

"This isn't real," I whisper against my palm. "This can't be real."

Through my panic, I catch a shift in Jack's - or whatever his name is - expression. His black eyes narrow, head tilting like he's listening for something.

A chill runs down my spine. The hair on my arms stands up. That feeling when you know someone's watching-

Strong hands grab me from behind. An arm locks around my waist, another across my chest. My feet leave the ground as I'm yanked backward.

"No!" I thrash against the iron grip. My elbow connects with something solid, but the hold doesn't loosen. The world blurs as I'm spun away from Jack.

"Vanessa!" Jack lunges forward, his alien features contorting in rage. But he stops

short, like he's hit an invisible wall.

My attacker's breath is hot against my ear. They smell wrong - like ozone and metal. Not human. Oh god, not human.

I kick backward, heel connecting with a shin. Nothing. It's like kicking concrete. My nails dig into the arms holding me, but they're covered in some kind of armor.

"Let her go!" Jack's voice booms through the alley, deeper than I've ever heard it. The brick walls seem to vibrate with his fury.

The grip around my chest tightens until I can barely breathe. Black spots dance in my vision. This can't be happening. This can't-

My feet drag against the ground as my captor pulls me deeper into the shadows. Away from Jack. Away from everything I knew about reality.

"Jack!" The name tears from my throat as my captor drags me backward. "Please!"

Jack strains forward, muscles bulging against whatever invisible force holds him back. His black eyes lock onto mine, desperate and determined. For a moment, I forget the horns, the red skin - I just see the man who held me on that rooftop, who made me laugh during laser tag, who looked at me like I was something precious.

A shadow moves behind him. My eyes widen as another figure materializes from the darkness. Taller than Jack, with grey, metallic skin that seems to ripple like liquid mercury. No face - just a smooth, reflective surface where features should be.

"Behind you!"

Jack spins, but too late. The creature's arm whips out - impossibly fast, impossibly

long - and connects with Jack's temple. The crack echoes through the alley.

"No!" I throw my weight forward, but my captor's grip is unyielding. "Jack!"

Jack crumples like a marionette with cut strings. Blood trickles from his temple, stark crimson against his dark red skin. His black eyes flutter, unfocused, before closing.

My scream catches in my lungs as a cold, metallic hand clamps over my mouth. The smell of ozone burns my nostrils. I bite down hard, but my teeth just scrape uselessly against the material.

My heels drag across the pavement as my captor pulls me backward. The world tilts and spins. Jack's unconscious form grows smaller, farther away. No, no, no. I kick, twist, claw at the arms holding me, but it's like fighting against steel cables.

The mercury-skinned creature looms over Jack's body, its featureless face reflecting the dim alley light.

Tears blur my vision. My lungs burn from lack of air. The hand over my mouth presses harder, and black spots dance at the edges of my sight. My muscles feel heavy, weak. Some kind of drug? Or just panic?

The last thing I see is Jack's limp form being before the darkness at the edge of the alley swallows us whole.

CHAPTER 20

VANESSA

My head throbs as consciousness creeps back. Cold seeps through my clothes, making me shiver. The floor beneath me is smooth, hard - metal, not concrete. Not my apartment. Not the alley.

I force my eyes open. The ceiling above me gleams with a dull, silvery sheen. No light fixtures, but a soft blue glow emanates from somewhere I can't pinpoint. The walls curve up from the floor in one seamless piece, like I'm inside a giant metal egg.

"Hello?" My voice cracks. The word echoes strangely, bouncing back at me with an electronic undertone that makes my skin crawl.

I push myself up to sitting, fighting a wave of nausea. My muscles ache like I've run a marathon. The events before I blacked out flash through my mind in disconnected fragments:

Jack's face changing. Red skin. Black eyes. Horns.

The grip of steel arms around my chest.

The mercury creature appearing behind him.

The sickening crack as Jack fell.

"Oh god." I press my palms against my eyes, willing the images away. "This isn't happening. Wake up, wake up, wake up."

But the cold metal floor doesn't vanish. The strange blue light continues its eerie pulse. And when I lower my hands, I'm still alone in this impossible room.

Jack is an alien. The thought bounces around my skull, refusing to settle into anything resembling sense. The man who held me, kissed me, made me feel safe - he's not even human.

A laugh bubbles up, edged with hysteria. All those weird questions about dating. His intense focus on human behavior. The way he moved during laser tag. How could I have been so blind?

I bring my knees to my chest, trying to make myself smaller in this vast, empty space. The memory of his transformation plays on repeat - familiar features melting away to reveal something otherworldly. Something impossible.

But what terrifies me most isn't Jack's true form. It's the desperate look in those alien eyes when he tried to reach me. The raw fear in his voice when he screamed my name.

A soft hiss cuts through the silence. A panel in the curved wall slides open, revealing a figure that makes me scramble back until I hit the opposite wall.

She's tall - at least seven feet - with iridescent scales covering her body in shades of blue and green. Her eyes are huge, silver orbs without pupils, and what I first think is hair turns out to be dozens of delicate tentacles flowing from her scalp.

"Please don't scream." Her voice has a musical quality, like wind chimes in a breeze. "I'm not here to harm you."

I press myself harder against the wall, heart thundering. "What do you want?"

"My name is Mar'oo." She stays by the door, hands raised in what I guess is meant to be a calming gesture. "I'm supposed to prepare you for transport."

"Transport where?" My voice comes out stronger than I feel.

"To auction." She tilts her head, tentacles swaying with the movement. "Pure humans are... rare out here. Especially ones as physically appealing as you. The bidding will be fierce."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. "Auction? You're going to sell me?"

"I don't want to." Mar'oo's silver eyes dim slightly. "But we all have our roles here. The collectors find specimens, and we prepare them for sale."

"Specimens? I'm not a specimen. I'm a person."

"To them, you're both." She gestures at my body. "Unmarked human DNA is valuable. Some collectors want to study you. Others..." She trails off, looking away.

I think of Jack's warnings about his superiors, about the danger. He tried to protect me from this. And now I'm here, about to be sold like a piece of exotic art to the highest bidder.

The tears come without warning, hot and desperate. I curl into myself, shoulders shaking as sobs wrack my body. All those times I thought my life was falling apart - bad breakups, losing my scholarship, fighting with my parents - seem laughably small now.

"Please don't cry." Mar'oo takes a hesitant step forward. "The process isn't painful."

They'll make sure you're comfortable-"

"Comfortable?" I choke out a bitter laugh. "While they study me like a lab rat? Or keep me as what - a pet? Or even a...oh god."

She drifts closer, her tentacles rippling with what might be distress. "Some masters treat their humans very well. Like precious treasures."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" I swipe at my cheeks, but fresh tears replace the ones I wipe away. "I had a life. A job. Friends. And now I'm just... property?"

Mar'oo kneels beside me, close enough that I can see patterns swirling beneath her scales. "I wish I could help. But the collectors... they own everything here. Including me."

Something in her voice makes me look up. Those silver eyes hold a shadow of understanding, of shared captivity. She reaches out with one delicate hand, hesitates, then gently touches my shoulder.

"I'm so scared," I whisper, the admission breaking something loose inside me. Fresh sobs bubble up, and to my surprise, Mar'oo pulls me into an embrace. Her scales are smooth and cool against my tear-stained face.

"I know," she murmurs, her musical voice carrying notes of sorrow. "I know."

I sink into Mar'oo's embrace, my mind drifting to Jack. Not the alien version that shattered my reality, but the man who made me laugh during laser tag. Who kissed me under the stars. Who made me feel like I was the most fascinating person he'd ever met.

The image of him crumpling to the ground plays on repeat. That mercury-like creature appearing behind him. The sickening thud. The way his eyes - those impossible black eyes - had locked onto mine in that final moment, filled with desperate love and regret.

"He tried to warn me," I whisper against Mar'oo's scales. "He pushed me away to protect me, and I thought... I thought he just didn't want me anymore."

My chest aches with the weight of everything unsaid. I'd been ready to tell him I loved him. Now he's probably lying dead in that alley, and I'll never get the chance.

"The man they took you from?" Mar'oo's tentacles brush soothingly against my hair. "The one who changed form?"

I nod, unable to speak through the fresh wave of grief.

"He wasn't like the others," she says softly. "Most observers maintain strict distance. They never... fall in love."

Love. The word pierces through me like a blade. I'd been so careful with my heart, built walls so high after every disappointment. Then Jack came along with his strange questions and intense focus, and somehow slipped right past every defense.

"I loved him back," I admit, the words barely audible. "God, I loved him, and I never told him. And now..."

CHAPTER 21

JACK

I wake with a splitting headache and the taste of blood in my mouth. The pavement beneath me is cold, but my rage burns hotter than any sun in the galaxy. Vanessa. They took her. My failure to protect her claws at my insides like a rabid beast.

"Computer, track the last quantum signature from this location." My wrist device flickers to life, scanning the residual energy patterns. The kidnappers' transport left a trace - sloppy work typical of black market operators.

My body trembles as I pull myself up, switching forms back to my Vakutan self. No more hiding. The signature matches a known trafficking route to Glimner. Of course it would be Glimner - that cesspool of corruption where anything can be bought and sold.

"Access Project Veritas mission files - cross reference known slave trade operations on Glimner." The data streams across my vision, each new piece of information stoking my fury. Humans are considered exotic, commanding astronomical prices. The thought of Vanessa being auctioned off like property makes me want to tear the whole planet apart.

I slam my fist into the wall, leaving a crater in the brick. This is my fault. I should have told her everything sooner, protected her better. Instead, I let my feelings cloud my judgment until it was too late.

"Prep emergency transport to Glimner, priority clearance." To hell with protocol and mission parameters. I'll burn every bridge I have to get her back.

The coordinates lock onto a sprawling market district, a maze of neon and shadows where the galaxy's worst predators gather to trade their "merchandise." I know exactly the kind of monsters I'll find there. Good. They'll learn what happens when you take something precious from a Vakutan warrior.

Back home, my PerComm chimes with an incoming transmission. Commander Vex'tra's hologram materializes, her expression carved from stone. "Agent Jorun, return to base immediately. That's an order."

"With respect, Commander, I can't do that." I continue prepping my weapons, checking the charge on my plasma rifle.

"The human female is a lost cause. You've already compromised the mission beyond repair. Don't make this worse."

I slam the rifle down. "Her name is Vanessa."

"Exactly my point. You're emotionally compromised. The trafficking rings on Glimner are protected by forces that would crush you without a second thought. Stand down."

"They took her because of me. Because I failed to-"

"That's precisely why you need to withdraw. Your attachment to this human has made you reckless. The Project cannot risk further exposure."

My hands clench into fists. "So we just abandon her to slavery? Is that what we stand for now?"

"What happens to one human is insignificant compared to our larger mission. You know this, Jorun. Don't throw away your career - your life - for a primitive species."

"Primitive?" I bark out a laugh. "You haven't seen what I've seen. Haven't felt what I've..." I catch myself, but it's too late.

Vex'tra's eyes narrow. "You've fallen in love with her."

"Commander-

"This is no longer a request. Return to base within the hour or face immediate extraction and court martial. End transmission."

The hologram vanishes, leaving me alone with my choice. My superiors, my career, my entire life's work on one side. And on the other... Vanessa's smile. Her passion. Her trust in me that I betrayed.

I know exactly where to go. There's a small Vakutan outpost disguised as an abandoned warehouse just outside the city. I tap my acknowledgement into my PerComm, sealing my alibi. They won't be expecting me - they think I'm following orders like a good little soldier.

The security pad recognizes my credentials. For now. Won't be long before Vex'tra locks me out of the system entirely. I slip inside, moving through shadows I know by heart. Three guards on rotation, predictable patterns. I time my movements between their sweeps, using my knowledge of our protocols against them.

The hangar holds two ships - a bulky transport vessel and a smaller stealth craft. Perfect. The stealth ship's systems hum to life under my touch. I've piloted these beauties before, but never like this. Never as a deserter.

"Alert: Unauthorized access detected in Hangar Bay 2."

Damn. Faster than I expected. My fingers fly across the controls, bypassing safety protocols. The ship's engine whines in protest.

"Step away from the vessel, Agent Jorun." The guard's voice echoes through the hangar. "Commander's orders."

"Sorry friend, can't do that." I don't look up from the console. Just a few more seconds...

Plasma fire sizzles past my head, leaving a scorched mark on the ship's hull. They're not playing around.

The engine roars to life. I slam the hatch control, sealing myself inside as more shots pepper the ship's exterior. The guards scatter as I lift off, the hangar doors still sealed above me.

"Last chance, Jorun!"

I grip the controls tight. "Computer, calculate structural weak points in hangar ceiling."

The computer highlights a section where the metal has thinned from age. I angle the ship's nose up, diverting power to forward shields.

"Sorry about the mess," I mutter, then punch it. The ship rockets upward, tearing through metal and concrete like tissue paper. Alarms scream. Debris rains down. But I'm already breaking atmosphere, plotting a course to Glimner.

It's going to take a long time to get there, but I'll do everything I can to make it before

it's too late. No matter what, however long it takes, I'll find her. I'll hold her again and never let her go.

Hold on, Vanessa. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 22

VANESSA

I trace my fingers along the cold metal walls of my cell, searching for any weakness. Three days in this nightmare, and I still can't believe this is real. The dim purple lighting casts eerie shadows across the floor, making everything feel like some twisted sci-fi movie.

"You should eat something." Mar'oo's soft voice comes from the doorway. She holds out a bowl of what looks like glowing blue rice. Her silver eyes reflect genuine concern.

"I can't stomach anything right now." I sink down onto the hard bench that serves as my bed. "How many others are here? Like me?"

Mar'oo sets the bowl beside me and sits cross-legged on the floor. Her translucent skin shifts colors with her movements. "Just two others. Most humans don't survive the journey through the void."

My stomach lurches. "And what happens to the ones who do?"

"Rich masers buy them. Keep them as...exotic pets, usually." She picks at something invisible on her sleeve. "Some end up in research facilities."

"Why are you telling me this?" I pull my knees to my chest.

"Because you deserve to know. And because..." She leans closer, voice dropping to a whisper. "I think I might be able to help you."

Hope flutters in my chest, but fear grips tighter. "Why would you risk helping me?"

"I'm not here by choice either." Mar'oo's skin darkens to a deep blue. "They took me from my fishing village, forced me to help them catch humans. I hate what they make me do."

I study her face, searching for any sign of deception. All I see is the same trapped desperation I feel. "If we get caught-"

"They'll kill us both." She stands, smoothing her strange iridescent clothing. "But staying here... that's just dying slower."

I nod, understanding completely. We're both prisoners here, just in different ways.

"You need to get out before the auction begins. There's a hallway you'll be escorted down. That's your chance. Your only one." Her silver eyes dart to the corridor. "Once they process the bids, it's over."

Heavy footsteps echo down the hall. Mar'oo vanishes through the door just as voices drift closer. I press myself against the wall, straining to hear.

"The female specimen is prime grade." A gravelly voice reverberates through the metal. "Young, healthy, excellent physical condition."

"What's the starting bid?" Another voice, smoother but somehow more chilling.

"Two hundred thousand credits. She's got spirit too - the kind of fire that'll make an excellent addition to any collection."

My skin crawls. I dig my nails into my palms to keep from screaming.

"Any signs of genetic manipulation?"

"Pure Earth stock. We ran full diagnostics. No augmentations, no tampering. Natural beauty, as they say."

"Interesting. My employer has been seeking an authentic human for his menagerie. The last one... didn't survive the adjustment period."

Bile rises in my throat. I slide down the wall, wrapping my arms around myself.

"This one's stronger. Look at the muscle tone, the bone density readings. She'll adapt."

"And if she doesn't?"

A laugh that sounds like grinding metal. "Then you'll get first pick of our next batch. We have scouts tracking several promising targets on Earth."

Their voices fade as they move down the corridor, but their words echo in my head. More humans. More people like me, torn from their lives to be sold like animals.

I pull the key card from my pocket, running my fingers over its strange symbols. Mar'oo is right - I have to get out of here. Not just for myself anymore, but to warn others. To stop this from happening again.

The question is: how much time do I have left?

The door hisses open and three hulking figures fill the entrance. Their skin looks like polished obsidian, reflecting the purple lights in nauseating patterns.

"Time to go, pretty thing." The tallest one reaches for my arm.

I spring into action, ramming my shoulder into his midsection. He stumbles back, more from surprise than impact. I dart past him, my heart thundering against my ribcage.

The corridor stretches before me - just like Mar'oo described. Freedom is somewhere at the end of it.

My bare feet slap against the metal floor as I run. Behind me, curses in alien languages echo off the walls. I push harder, faster-

Something wraps around my ankle. I crash to the ground, chin smacking the floor. Metallic blood fills my mouth.

"Feisty one." A three-fingered hand grabs my hair, yanking me up. "But stupid."

I kick and thrash, connecting with something solid. A grunt of pain. Small victory.

"Enough!" The obsidian alien pulls out a small device. It hums with electric energy.

Pain explodes through my body. My muscles seize. I can't breathe, can't think-

The world goes dark around the edges as they drag me down the corridor. My limbs won't respond, but my mind screams in frustrated rage.

"Careful with the merchandise." A new voice, silky and cold. "Damaged goods fetch lower prices."

They prop me up against a wall. As my vision clears, I see we're in some kind of amphitheater. Dozens of alien faces stare down at me from elevated seats, their

features blurring together in a nightmare kaleidoscope.

"Now then." The obsidian alien fastens something around my neck. "Let's begin the bidding."

The creatures tower above me, their forms blending into a horrific mosaic of teeth, tentacles, and too many eyes. My neck burns where the collar digs into my skin.

"Look at the pigmentation." A spindly being leans forward, multiple pupils dilating. "So rare to find one with this coloring."

"The bone structure suggests prime breeding age." Another voice, like gravel in a blender. "And the muscle density readings are exceptional."

Tears slide silently down my cheeks as they dissect me with their gazes. I try to make myself smaller, but rough hands force me to stand straight.

"Show them your teeth," the obsidian guard growls, yanking my chin up.

I clamp my jaw shut. A jolt of electricity from the collar makes me gasp in pain.

"Perfect dental formation." Someone clicks in approval. "No genetic modifications at all."

"The hair length is ideal." A tentacled creature reaches down, wrapping a slimy appendage around my ponytail. "Most specimens we receive have such short, coarse strands."

My stomach heaves as alien fingers prod at my arms, my face, treating me like livestock at auction. More tears fall, but I refuse to make a sound. I won't give them the satisfaction of hearing me break.

"The last one with this much fight lasted three cycles in my arena." Another voice booms. "I'll start the bidding at three hundred thousand credits."

I close my eyes, unable to watch as they bid on my future. The tears won't stop now, streaming down my face in hot rivers of despair. Everything I am - my dreams, my life, my humanity - reduced to numbers in an alien marketplace.

CHAPTER 23

JACK

The stench of Glimner's underworld hits my nostrils - a mix of rotting flesh and cheap synthetic drugs. I move through the shadows of the marketplace, my true form allowing me to blend with the other criminals and lowlives that populate this cesspool.

My fists clench as I pass another auction block. Humans aren't the only species sold here, but they fetch the highest prices. The thought of Vanessa up there makes my blood boil.

"Fresh merchandise, just in from Ataxian space!" A vendor waves tentacles at me. I grab one, twisting until he squeals.

"A human female. Where?"

"I-I don't handle the premium stock." His eyes dart toward a heavily guarded building at the end of the street. "Try the Golden Cage. But you didn't hear it from me."

I release him and slip between the market stalls. My warrior training takes over - assessing threats, mapping escape routes, identifying weak points in security. Two armed guards at the main entrance. Three more patrolling the perimeter. Surveillance drones buzzing overhead.

The Golden Cage lives up to its name, all gaudy architecture and gilded doors. But

underneath the glamour, I spot the reinforced walls and energy shields. This is a fortress.

A group of wealthy buyers flows through the entrance, flashing their credentials. I fall in behind them, mimicking their entitled swagger. The guards' eyes slide right past me.

Inside, the air is thick with expensive perfumes masking the underlying rot. Aliens of various species lounge on plush cushions, drinking and sampling "merchandise." My enhanced hearing picks up fragments of conversation - an auction is starting soon.

I find a shadowy alcove and activate my PerComm, hacking into their security network. The building schematics appear - holding cells in the sub-basement, auction stage on the top floor. Multiple escape routes, but all heavily monitored.

My combat instincts catalog every weapon and potential ally in sight. I may be outnumbered, but I've fought worse odds. And I've never had more motivation to win.

Hang on, Vanessa. I'm coming for you.

I push through the crowd of buyers, my hearts pounding as I hear the auctioneer's voice echo through the chamber. The sickly sweet scent of Luxarian wine and body modifications fills my nostrils as I shoulder past a group of elites.

"And now, our premium lot of the evening..."

The spotlight hits the stage, and my breath catches. Vanessa stands there, tears streaming down her face. They've dressed her in some kind of sheer, flowing garment that makes her look ethereal - and vulnerable. Her hands are bound in front of her with energy cuffs that cast a blue glow across her skin, a collar digging into her neck.

"A pure human female, untouched by genetic modification. Note the natural coloring, the symmetrical features..."

The auctioneer's tentacles slide across her cheek. Vanessa flinches but can't pull away. Something dark and primal rises in my chest, a feeling I haven't experienced since my warrior days.

Numbers flash across the holoscreen as buyers raise their neural interfaces. Four hundred thousand. Five hundred thousand. Seven hundred thousand.

Vanessa's eyes scan the crowd desperately. When they meet mine, I see recognition flash across her face, followed by hope - and fear. She's probably wondering if I'm here to save her or buy her.

"Eight thousand!" A Draknid in the front row leers at her, his scaled tongue flicking out to taste the air.

The rage building inside me explodes. My carefully maintained control shatters like glass. I don't care about my mission anymore. I don't care about maintaining cover or following protocol. All I see is Vanessa, trembling on that stage, being treated like property.

My true form ripples through my human disguise as I leap forward. Buyers scatter, screaming. Guards reach for their weapons. The auctioneer's tentacles curl in alarm.

"She's not for sale," I growl, my voice deepening to its natural resonance.

The first guard doesn't even see me coming. I slam my fist into his throat, crushing his windpipe before he can raise the alarm. My warrior training takes over - each movement precise, lethal, practiced.

"Security breach!" A voice crackles over the comm system. Too late.

I spin, catching the energy blast from a second guard on my reinforced forearm. The shot dissipates harmlessly. These fools think their weapons can stop a Vakutan warrior? I close the distance in two strides, wrapping my hand around his weapon. The metal crumples like paper in my grip.

"What are you?" His eyes widen in terror.

I answer with my fist.

Bodies hit the floor as I tear through their ranks. My horns gleam under the auction house lights, no longer hidden by my human disguise. Each guard that falls is one step closer to Vanessa.

A security drone swoops down. I catch it mid-flight, using its momentum to swing it like a club into three approaching guards. The resulting explosion throws golden sparks across the panicking crowd.

"Stop him!" The auctioneer's tentacles writhe in panic. He pushes Vanessa behind him, thinking she's valuable merchandise to protect.

Big mistake.

I leap onto the stage, my boots leaving dents in the polished floor. Two more guards rush me with shock batons. I catch one by the neck, using him as a shield against the other's attack. The electricity courses through his body instead of mine.

The second guard backs away, fumbling for his sidearm. I toss his unconscious companion aside and advance. The fear in his eyes tells me he knows what's coming.

"Please..." he whimpers.

I show him the same mercy they showed Vanessa - none.

When it's all said and done, Vanessa looks up at me, her eyes wide and full of fear. I can easily tell: she doesn't know whether to trust me or run like hell.

CHAPTER 24

VANESSA

My mind can't process what I'm seeing. The creature before me has Jack's voice, but everything else is alien—deep red skin that seems to shimmer under the harsh lights, black eyes that hold galaxies in their depths, and those horns... My stomach lurches.

"Vanessa." He takes a step toward me.

I stumble backward, my heel catching on the platform's edge. My body remembers every kiss, every touch, every moment we shared—but it was all with someone who didn't exist. A lie. A mask.

"Don't." My voice cracks. The auction house chaos swirls around us—screaming, fighting, the sound of weapons I've never heard before. But all I can see is him.

"We need to move." His voice is still Jack's, still has that same intensity that made my knees weak at the coffee shop. But now it comes from between sharp teeth, from lips that aren't human.

He reaches for my arm and I jerk away, my breath coming in short gasps. The touch that once set my skin on fire now sends ice through my veins.

"Vanessa, please." His black eyes lock onto mine. "I love you. I will get you out of here. Please trust me."

The words collide like a physical blow. Love. Trust. How can he say those words after everything? After lying about who—what—he is? After putting me in danger? After...

But then I see it. Behind the alien features, behind the horrifying truth of what he is, I see how he looks at me. It's the same look he gave me on that rooftop under the stars. The same look he had when he taught me to make pasta. The same look that made me feel safe, seen, understood.

I want to run. I want to scream. I want to wake up from this nightmare.

But I don't do any of those things. I stand frozen, torn between my fear and something else—something that feels terrifyingly like love.

My heart pounds in my chest as I make my choice. I grab his hand—his skin feels different now, warmer, almost electric—but there's no time to process it. We run.

"Left," he barks, pulling me down a corridor that looks like something out of a sci-fi nightmare. Metal walls pulse with strange blue light. The floor vibrates beneath my feet.

A guard appears—at least I think it's a guard. The creature towers over us, its skin translucent enough that I can see its organs shifting. Jack moves faster than I can track, taking it down with a series of precise strikes.

"Hold still." His fingers work at the collar around my neck. The metal burns cold against my skin before clicking open. I gasp as it falls away, rubbing my throat.

"Arms." He breaks the cuffs with bare hands, the metal crumpling like paper. I flex my wrists, wincing at the raw skin underneath.

More shouts echo behind us. The walls flash red now, and something that sounds like an alarm but feels like it's inside my skull starts blaring.

"Through here." Jack kicks open a door that shouldn't exist—it simply appears in the wall as we approach. The sight makes my head spin, but I follow him through.

We emerge into what looks like a hangar. Strange vehicles hover silently, their shapes defying physics. Jack leads me toward one that's smaller than the rest, sleek and predatory.

"I know this is insane," he says, helping me climb inside. "But right now we need to?—"

A blast of energy scorches the wall beside us. I scream, ducking into the ship's interior.

The ship hums to life around me, lights blinking in patterns that make my eyes hurt.

Jack's fingers move across what must be controls, though they look more like floating crystals than any dashboard I've ever seen. His movements are precise, practiced. How many times has he done this? How many other humans has he...

The ship lurches. My stomach rolls as we shoot upward, the force pressing me deeper into the seat. Through the curved window (is it even glass?), I watch the alien city shrink beneath us. Buildings twist impossibly, their architecture defying gravity.

"They're following." Jack's voice is tight. The ship banks hard right, and I bite back a scream as three sleek shapes appear behind us, trailing streams of blue light.

Energy blasts streak past us, close enough that I feel their heat through the hull. Jack weaves between them, his movements fluid and deadly. The alien city disappears

completely as we punch through clouds that look like liquid metal.

My ears pop. The sky darkens. And then—stars. More stars than I've ever seen, so bright and close they hurt to look at.

I'm in space. Actually in space. With an alien who I thought was the first man I could trust in years.

"Vanessa." Jack's voice is soft, careful. Like he's talking to a spooked animal. "I know you have questions?—"

I turn away from him, pressing my forehead against the warm window. Tears float away from my eyes in perfect spheres, catching the starlight like tiny diamonds.

The ship's gentle hum fills the silence between us. I watch unfamiliar constellations drift past, trying to process everything that's happened. My throat still burns from where that collar sat.

"I should take you home." Jack's voice breaks through my thoughts.

The word 'home' hits me like a slap. I whirl around to face him, no longer caring about his alien appearance. "Home? You mean back to Earth? Back to my little coffee shop and my tiny apartment like none of this ever happened?"

"It's the safest?—"

"Don't." My voice cracks. "Don't you dare tell me what's safe. You lied to me for weeks. You let me fall for you while studying me like some lab rat. And now that everything's blown up, you want to just... dump me back where you found me?"

His black eyes widen. "Vanessa, that's not?—"

"I trusted you." The words tear from my throat. "Do you know how hard that was for me? To finally let someone in? And now you're doing exactly what everyone else has done—deciding what's best for me and walking away."

"I'm trying to protect you."

"I don't need your protection!" Hot tears spill down my cheeks. "I need you to stop making decisions for me. I need you to actually see me as a person, not just some human subject or someone you need to save."

Jack's red hands grip the controls tighter, his alien features impossible to read. But I see the way his shoulders slump, the way he won't quite meet my eyes.

"You're right," he says quietly. "I'm still treating you like a subject. Like something to be studied and protected rather than..." He trails off.

"Rather than what?"

"Rather than the woman I fell in love with."

The words hang between us like stars, bright and dangerous and impossible to ignore.

CHAPTER 25

JACK

I guide the ship through space, stealing glances at Vanessa. She's curled up in the co-pilot seat, arms wrapped around herself, eyes fixed on the stars streaking past. The silence between us cuts deeper than any wound.

The ship emerges into the Aurelia system. Three moons dance around a crystalline planet that shimmers like a pearl in space.

"We're here." My voice sounds rough, uncertain.

Vanessa lifts her head, and I see her breath catch. The planet's surface is a maze of floating islands covered in bioluminescent forests. Crystal waterfalls pour from one island to the next, their mist catching rainbow light from the triple moons.

I land on a secluded plateau overlooking an endless horizon of floating gardens. When the ship's door opens, the air fills with chimes – the sound of crystal flowers singing in the breeze.

"What is this place?" Vanessa whispers, taking a hesitant step onto the iridescent grass.

"The Singing Gardens of Aurelia. Couples travel across galaxies to walk these paths." I stay back, giving her space. "The flowers respond to emotions. The stronger the feeling, the more they sing."

The crystal blooms around us pulse with light, their song growing more complex. I watch Vanessa reach out to touch one, her fingers trembling.

"If this is the last time we're together, I want you to remember this." The words scrape my throat. "Not the fear, not the lies. This moment, under these moons, where everything is possible."

The flowers' song swells, and Vanessa turns to face me. Her eyes shine with unshed tears, reflecting the dancing lights of Aurelia's sky. For the first time since my revelation, she really looks at me – sees me – in my true form.

I stand at the edge of the crystalline shore, where liquid starlight laps against the prismatic sand. The setting sun of Aurelia paints the horizon in shades of gold and violet I've never seen on Earth. Behind me, I hear Vanessa's soft footsteps in the sand, hesitant but steady.

My hearts pound against my chest, but I keep my gaze fixed on the horizon. Every instinct screams to turn around, to reach for her, to explain everything again. Instead, I remain still, letting the warm breeze ruffle my dark hair and brush against my horns.

The singing flowers that dot the beach hum a melancholic tune, responding to the storm of emotions between us. Their petals pulse with each note, casting dancing shadows across the sand.

I spread my fingers, watching how the golden light plays across my red skin. It's never been like this before. I feel exposed in my true form – vulnerable in a way no battle training prepared me for. But I won't hide anymore. Not from her.

The sound of her breathing changes – closer now. Still, I don't move. This has to be her choice. After everything she's been through, everything I put her through, she deserves to decide what happens next.

I hear her breath catch, and the singing flowers shift their melody. Through our strange connection, I sense her thoughts turning to Earth – to the life she left behind, the coffee shop with its garish Valentine's decorations, her friend Becca who will never know what happened to her. The weight of her loss fills the air between us.

The flowers pulse faster, their song growing more complex as Vanessa's emotions surge. I feel her fear, her uncertainty about trusting someone who lied about his very nature. Yet beneath it all runs a current of something else – something that makes my heart race.

I risk turning my head slightly, catching her reflection in a nearby crystal formation. She's staring at me, really looking at me, in a way that makes my skin burn. Not with revulsion or terror, but with recognition. Her eyes trace the lines of my horns, the sharp angles of my face, the deep red of my skin – and I see the moment something shifts in her expression.

The crystal flowers burst into a new melody, bright and clear. My breath catches as I recognize the emotion they're reflecting – it's the same song they played that night on the rooftop when we first kissed, when she was looking at my human form with that same expression of wonder and trust.

She takes another step closer, and I feel the heat of her presence at my back. The triple moons of Aurelia cast her shadow beside mine on the prismatic sand, and for a moment, they merge into one.

"Jack," she whispers, and my name on her lips sounds like both a question and an answer.

I remain still, hardly daring to breathe, as she moves to stand beside me. Her hand hovers near mine, not quite touching, but close enough that I can feel the electricity between us.

My hearts nearly stop when Vanessa steps forward, her eyes meeting mine with fierce determination. The crystal flowers around us pulse with an intensity I've never seen before, their song reaching a crescendo that makes the very air vibrate.

"I don't want to go back," she says, her voice stronger than I've ever heard it. "I want to be with you."

All my careful restraint shatters. I pull her to me, one hand cupping her face while the other wraps around her waist. Her skin is so soft under my touch, and I can feel her pulse racing beneath my fingers.

I capture her lips with mine, pouring every unspoken word, every moment of longing, every ounce of fear and hope into the kiss. She responds with equal passion, her fingers sliding up to trace the base of my horns, making me shudder. I deepen the kiss, tasting the salt of tears – hers or mine, I'm not sure anymore.

The singing flowers explode in a symphony of light and sound around us, their melody weaving together threads of human and Vakutan emotion into something entirely new. Something that belongs only to us.

I hold her closer, memorizing every detail of this moment: the way she fits perfectly against me despite our differences, how her breath catches when I run my fingers through her hair, the small sound she makes in the back of her throat as she pulls me even closer.

This kiss is different from all our others. There are no more secrets between us, no more hiding. Just pure, raw truth – and acceptance.

CHAPTER 26

VANESSA

The sunset here bleeds bronze across the waves. Jack's fingertips graze my jaw, the alien texture of his palms catching on my windblown hair. His true form still makes my pulse stutter—crimson ridges along his temples, eyes like twin voids ringed with silver. But when his lips brush mine, taste like stardust and the salted caramel lattes he'd chug at The Love Roast, familiar wins over foreign.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs against my mouth, claws tangled in the hem of my sweater. His teeth catch my lower lip—sharp, not quite human.

I bite back. Harder. "Never."

Our kiss ignites from ember to wildfire. His tongue traces the seam of my lips and I open for him, letting the universe dissolve into the heat of our shared breath. Sand grinds against my knees as I push him back, following the momentum until he's sprawled beneath me. Three claw marks split the front of his shirt when I yank at the fabric.

"Careful," he growls, fangs glinting. "This isn't negotiable currency."

I press my thumbs into the hollow of his throat, feel his pulse rabbit under alien skin. "Less talking. More proving you're not a hallucination."

His laugh reverberates through my ribs as he flips us. The sudden inversion leaves me

gasping, torn between the ache between my thighs and the stupid bubble of laughter in my chest. His claws skate up my side, leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake.

"Humans are so fragile," he muses, dragging his mouth along the cord of my neck.

"Keep underestimating me." I twist my fingers around his horns, tugging until his hips snap against mine. The groan that punches out of him echoes the crash of the waves.

A hiss escapes his fangs when my teeth find the crimson slope of his shoulder. "Duplicitous little thing. All those months playing barista when you were this?—"

My nails carve half-moons into his back. "You talked me into galaxy-hopping. Don't pretend I'm the unpredictable variable here."

His mouth silences me again, rough and claiming. Our joined laughter dies against bruised lips. The way his true form slots against mine like we're solving some equation older than stars.

Jack's claw traces the welt his teeth left on my collarbone. "Still want to stay?"

I arch into his touch, the last coherent syllable dying as his mouth descends again. The answer's in the sand beneath us—the galaxy's worst etch-a-sketch, all tangled limbs and broken grammar.

The sand's still gritty against my calves when his claws catch the lace hem of my panties. I buck against him on instinct, the dress from that damn auction riding up and pooling around my hips. His fanged grin flashes in the bronze half-light. "This fabric chafes," he lies, voice all gravel and galaxy dust.

I dig my heel into the small of his back. "Says the guy who still wears tactical gear to

bed."

"Observation." His thumb strokes the inside of my thigh, claws retracted to blunt crescents. "Human undergarments seem designed to frustrate."

My laugh fractures as his fingers skate higher. The dress is half-unzipped, auction stench replaced by salt from the sea.

The lace tears clean. I don't remember him moving, just the sudden bite of alien air between my legs and his low, approving rumble.

His finger traces idle circles over my slit, the pad rougher than human skin. "Pulse points. Moisture variance. The way you stop breathing when I?—"

My hips jerk. "Jack."

"Jorun." His correction's a hot slide against my neck while his finger slips inside my opening, curling in a way that steals syllables. The stretch burns—he's wider than human, ridges along his knuckles catching sensitive flesh.

I choke on a curse. "Warn a girl."

He stills. "Stop?"

"Never." I claw at his horns, dragging his mouth to mine. His tongue mimics the rhythm below, relentless and clever. The sand shifts under us, waves hushing against the shore like they're leaning in.

His free hand paws at my crumpled dress. His claw snags the neckline. Fabric splits like perforated lies.

The chill hits first, then his mouth. He laps at the hollow of my throat, fingers pumping slowly as I unravel.

I arch, salt spray mingling with sweat as his thumb finds that perfect spot. Distantly, I register his belt clinking open, the growl in his chest when I palm his cock through his pants.

The sand shifts under me as he braces one clawed hand beside my head. His other palm skims up my thigh, scales catching on bare skin. When his hips slot between mine, the heat of him—foreign and familiar at once—steals my breath. Moonlight glints off crimson shoulders as he drags his pants down. Alien anatomy shouldn't make sense here, but the thick length straining against my inner thigh feels purpose-built to ruin me.

“Still think this is a hallucination?” His claws flex against my hips.

The words die when he drags himself through my slick. My moan tangles with the crash of waves. “Need... comparative analysis?”

His fangs graze my earlobe. “Yes.” The blunt head of his cock teases my entrance. “Humans evolved for this?”

“Not... for the agony of blue balls you're inflict— oh fuck .” My back arches as he sheathes himself inch by excruciating inch into my pussy, ridges catching in ways that punch ragged noises from my throat.

He stills, chest heaving. “Too much?”

“Too slow.” My nails dig into the cords of his neck.

His snarl sends heat pooling low as his hips snap forward. The stretch

burns—humanity was not designed for Vakutan proportions. Every drag of those alien ridges sparks white behind my eyelids.

“Earth males lack endurance,” he growls against my collarbone, tongue lapping sweat. His thrusts turn brutal. “Subpar genetic stock.”

I bite the curve between neck and shoulder—salty, alien, perfect. “Better... study... harder.”

His claws carve unintentional hieroglyphics into the sand as my legs lock around his waist. It feels like he's been fucking me for several glorious, aching hours when his thumb finds my clit. My scream scatters seabirds from the alien mangroves.

“Human vocal cords,” he pants into the hollow of my throat as I pulse around him. “Underrated evolutionary marvel.”

The tremors haven't stopped when his rhythm fractures. I feel his release—hotter than blood—as he buries himself deep.

He collapses beside me, sand clinging to alien sweat, chest rising like tide-swollen waves. It's so strange, so wrong, and yet...

I can't think of anything I could possibly want more than this alien man laying at my side.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:34 am

The sand shifts beneath our feet as we walk along the shoreline. Vanessa's hand fits perfectly in mine, her fingers intertwined with my red ones. The moons cast everything in a silvery glow.

"I need to send my resignation," I say, pulling out my PerComm. "Though I doubt they'll accept it gracefully."

"Will they come after us?" Vanessa's grip tightens.

"Let them try." I tap out a brief message, keeping it professional despite the circumstances. "I'm done being their puppet. Done pretending to be something I'm not."

"Speaking of which..." Vanessa traces one of my horns with her free hand. "I kind of like the real you better."

"Even with all this?" I gesture to my crimson skin.

"Especially with all that." She smirks. "Though I'll miss the stubble."

I send the message and toss the PerComm into the violet waves. "There. No more Project Veritas. No more studying humans from a distance." I pull her close. "Just experiencing life with one particular human up close."

"So what now? Where do we go?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere." I sweep my arm across the horizon. "There are worlds out

there that would make Earth's most beautiful places look ordinary. Art that would make your fingers itch to create. And I want to show you all of it."

"Promise me something?" She presses her forehead against my chest.

"Anything."

"No more lies. No more missions. Just us being real with each other."

"I promise." I lift her chin. "You're my only mission now."

"Good." She rises on her toes to kiss me. "Because I'm not letting you go either."

I lean against the counter of The Star Roast, watching Vanessa work her magic. She's explaining Earth coffee to a bewildered Odex man whose furry paws keep dropping the mug

"No, like this," she demonstrates with infinite patience. "The wide part is for drinking."

The café buzzes with the familiar mix of human and alien chatter. The scent of fresh-baked pastries mingles with the aromatic Earth coffee we import at ridiculous expense. Worth every credit to see the faces of newly-arrived humans when they taste their first familiar drink in months.

"Another refugee incoming," I murmur as the door chimes. A young woman enters, looking shell-shocked, her clothes distinctly Earth-style but wrinkled from space travel.

Vanessa's already moving, pulling out a chair. "Hey there. Rough trip?"

"I... I don't even know where I am anymore." The woman's voice breaks.

"You're exactly where you need to be." Vanessa slides a steaming cup across the table. "Earth blend, extra sugar. On the house."

The woman takes a sip and bursts into tears. I've seen this scene play out dozens of times now - the relief of finding a piece of home in the vastness of space.

Vanessa catches my eye and winks. She's in her element here, creating this sanctuary for the lost and confused. Her walls are covered in her artwork now - scenes of Earth blending seamlessly into alien landscapes, bridging two worlds just like we do.

I lean against the counter, watching Vanessa balance precariously on a stepladder as she hangs glittering hearts from the ceiling. Her tongue pokes out slightly in concentration - a habit I've grown to adore.

"A little to the left," I suggest, fighting back a grin as she shoots me a look.

"If you're such an expert on Earth decorations now, why don't you come up here and do it yourself?"

"And miss this view? Never." My horns catch the light as I tilt my head appreciatively.

She throws a paper cupid at me. "Keep it professional, mister. We've got customers."

"They're all regulars. Half of them were at our mating ceremony."

Vanessa climbs down, surveying her work. The café looks like love exploded in it - hearts, flowers, and twinkling lights everywhere. Last year, she'd rolled her eyes at all this. Now she's humming as she adjusts a bouquet of roses.

"Remember when you first interviewed me about Valentine's Day?" She slides behind the counter, bumping her hip against mine. "All those weird questions about

human mating rituals?"

"In my defense, your customs are bizarre. An infant with arrows? Hearts that look nothing like actual cardiac organs?"

"Says the man who proposed by taking me to see a binary star system merge."

"That was romantic! The gravitational forces pulling them together, just like-"

She silences me with a kiss. "You're such a nerd."

"Your nerd," I murmur against her lips.

"Always," she agrees, then pulls back with a playful smile. "Now help me hang these stupid cupids or you're sleeping on the couch."

Hours later, the last customer shuffles out, their tentacles dragging slightly from too much caffeine. I flip the sign to "Closed" while Vanessa counts the register, humming an old Earth song under her breath. The café feels different at night - more intimate, the artificial starlight casting shadows through the hanging hearts.

"You missed one." I point to a stray paper cupid that's fallen behind a plant.

"Leave it. He can keep the Venusian fern company." She taps the screen, frowning. "Did we really go through twelve pounds of coffee today?"

"The Alliance delegation cleaned us out. Apparently, they're taking some back as 'exotic contraband.'"

"Great. More paperwork." She yawns, stretching her arms above her head. The movement makes her dress ride up slightly, and my hands itch to touch her. "Stop staring at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're planning to ravish me on the counter again."

"That was one time." I move behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist. "And you weren't complaining."

"We had to replace the espresso machine." But she leans back against me, her fingers tracing the ridges on my forearms. "The health inspector almost had a stroke."

"Worth it."

She turns in my arms, rising on her toes. Her lips brush mine, soft and sweet. "Happy Valentine's Day, my alien."

The words send a shiver through me. After everything - the lies, the reveal, the rescue - she's still here, still mine. And I'm completely, irrevocably hers.